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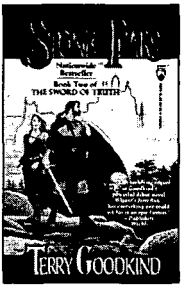

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THE INFINITE CAREER

JACK WILLIAMSON

ARTHUR Clarke once told me that if I lived another twenty years, I could live forever. That was something like forty years ago. We're both still alive and writing. People ask how we do it. I don't share his secrets, and I've never had any master plan for my own immortality. I've never been able to see much beyond the novel in progress. Yet, with my own first story published in 1928, I still enjoy life and work. I've been wondering if there is anything I might try to explain.

First of all, thanks are due my parents for good genes. My father lived to age ninety-six, active to the end and with a lively interest in the world. I owe a good deal to modern medicine. Looking back, I recall times enough when sheer chance and more times when my own stupidities might have done me in with a different fall of the dice. I've been helped by a lot of generous friends, as well as a remarkable run of great good luck.

I enjoy writing. For me, it has always filled an urgent need. The eldest sibling, I grew up on isolated farms and ranches, taught at home through the first few years, or more often allowed to teach myself by reading. With no social life, I turned to my own imagination, a habit I have never tried to break.

When I was about to begin analysis at the Menninger Clinic back in 1936, one of the psychologists suggested that writing fantasy was a symptom that analysis might relieve. Nothing I wanted, of course; it became one more problem for my own analyst, Charles W. Tidd, who came to understand me more humanely.

Half my life is still lived in fantasy. My recent novel, *Demon Moon*, was invented to brighten the tedium of long flights and long bus rides and long nights in strange hotel rooms on a tour of China. I'm far happier when I have a story going than when I don't.

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The writer's first need, of course, is some command of language and the craft. Though English is my only tongue, I've picked up smatterings of half a dozen others and learned linguistics enough to sharpen my perspective on language in general. The best way to learn, I think, is to teach. A professor of English for a good many years, I've taught grammar and linguistics and my share of freshman comp — and generally enjoyed it, though reading too many papers can become a chore.

The craft has always been a challenge. Home from the South Pacific after World War II, I found so many bright new writers publishing bright new fiction in bright new magazines that my own career seemed about to end. I spent the middle fifties writing a comic strip for the New York Sunday News, and went back to college when it expired.

Armed with degrees in English, I returned to Portales in 1960 to teach at Eastern New Mexico University, my hometown school. I had five comp classes through the first year or two. A deadly stint, but the college is small and people came to trust me. I was presently allowed to teach a panorama of courses that ranged from types of lit and the history of literary criticism to modern linguistics and one of the early academic courses in science fiction.

Hard work, but I enjoyed my students, my colleagues, and the chance to learn. Best of all was a course in literary figures that enabled me to collect a shelf of works and criticism and spend a semester with one or two great writers. We ranged from Melville and Mark Twain to Faulker and Hemingway, to James Joyce and Ibsen, to Tolstoy and Dostoievsky. Joyce was my favorite; I visited his martello tower in Dublin and looked for his grave in Zurich. I can't claim that I mastered his art, or any other, but surely I was learning something.

Courses in film and modern mystery fiction were on the list before I retired. I rented classic films for a historic survey, discussed cinematography, bought an 8mm camera and film for it. The students were divided into teams that wrote and produced their own short films. I enjoyed it. The class seemed to. I think we all learned something.

My wife and I used to travel every summer. I've seen all the continents and learned what I could of the histories and cultures of Russia and China, stories more fascinating than any fiction and good grist for more.

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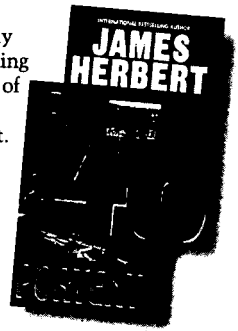

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With little time or energy left for writing, I did manage to stay in print through those college years, thanks to foreign sales, collaborations with Jim Gunn and Fred Pohl, and what I could write during summers and breaks. Retired as overage in 1977 — I'd turned sixty-nine, and I wanted to teach another year — I was once again a full-time writer.

Early in the game, when I regarded a story as a magical mass of words on paper, I tried desperately to master the magic. My model was Max Brand — a pen name of Frederick Faust, who published fine pulp fiction under a score of names. He was reputed to write 4000 words a day and sell them in first draft. I tried to follow his examples, and in fact did sell a good many of the stories.

Trying to make a system of authorship, I learned Leo Margules' formula for the Thrilling group, but formulas are no fun. I set up a file of ideas for plot, character, setting, story ideas. The file became a graveyard. Nothing that went into it ever came out again. The stories I sold came from ideas never hoarded; they had stayed alive and grown in my mind.

The greatest lesson I've ever learned is simply that technique is not enough. Language and technique are merely useful tools that enable you to say whatever you want to say, to share emotion and experience worth sharing. If the story doesn't matter to you, it won't matter to the reader.

My most successful novel has been *The Humanoids*, written after I got home from the Northern Solomons in 1945, where I had been forecasting tropical weather for Marine air groups. Before the war, most science fiction had been optimistic about the advance of technology and the human future. The atomic bomb cast its mushroom shadow over that.

My humanoids were man-shaped robots created in the aftermath of a terrible war, designed by men of good will to prevent another. They obey the Prime Directive, "To serve and obey, and guard man from harm." The complication is that they do it too well. Our best-meant technology, so the story says, can trip us. Though I myself was and am a hard-pressed optimist a story must be free to speak for itself.

Interests keep shifting, and most of my stories have come out of what concerned me at the time. Theories of history once obsessed me. I read several volumes of Arnold Toynbee's vast *Study of History*. He saw cultures as giant organisms

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that mature, age, and die. "Breakown" and *Star Bridge*, written with Jim Gunn, grew out of that notion.

Walter Prescott Webb outlined a more hopeful theory in *The Great Frontier*. His great frontier lay in the Americas and other new lands opened by the voyages of da Gama, Columbus, and Magellan. Their opening let Europeans escape their restrictive home societies to develop democracy in politics, Protestantism in religion, and private capitalism. In *The Starchild Trilogy*, with Fred Pohl, we opened our own future frontiers in space.

The idea of genetic engineering has excited me ever since I read Wells' *First Men in the Moon* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. *The New Collegiate* and the *OED* have promised to give me credit for introducing the term in the epigraph to *Dragon's Island*. That appeared in 1951, a few years before Watson and Crick broke the genetic code. Later, as the actual science advanced, I returned to the idea in *Brother to Demons, Brother to Gods* and again in *Firechild*.

The *OED* has also given me credit for inventing "terraforming," a word for the art of transforming new planets for human habitation, in *Seetee Ship* and *Seetee Shock*.

By great good luck, I was with the press at NASA in Pasadena for most of the Voyager flybys. The Voyager is a wonderful robot, which made us vicarious explorers of the solar system. We cruised by the major planets and close to icy moons that had never been more than points of light in telescopes. Our guides were the teams of scientists who presented and discussed the findings, day by day.

A thrilling experience for the sf writer. I learned about the Oort Cloud, the swarm of dirty snowballs that become comets when they drift near the sun, and found two novels there, *Lifeburst* and *Mazeway*. Later, after a tour of the unfinished Biosphere, I wrote *Beachhead*, a novel about the first flight to Mars and the effort to build a habitat and plant a colony.

The idea for *The Singers of Time* came from Stephen Hawking, who has the imagination of a top-rank science fiction writer. Reading his *Brief History of Time*, Fred Pohl and I decided to set a novel in his expanded universe.

Beyond the solar system, the frontiers of astronomers and cosmology are expanding faster than the universe. *The Black Sun* came from the mysteries of the galaxies in motion. They spin faster than

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the gravitation of their visible stars could make them spin. Much of their matter must be dark. Its nature is not yet known, but in the novel a quantum-driven spacecraft lands on the frozen planet of a dead sun, which no longer shines.

The Silicon Dagger, still in progress, springs from concerns closer to home. Out of discontent with current politics, I voted Libertarian in the last election and resolved to write a Libertarian novel. The Oklahoma City bomb and the militants on TV crystallized the idea. It's set in a nearly contemporary Kentucky county inhabited by people who declare and defend their independence.

Even a short story must have a reason to be. "The Fractal Man," in *VB Tech*, expands on an article in *Scientific American* suggesting that other space-time universes may be as numerous as the stars in our own. "The Hole in the World," coming up in *F&SF*, was done in a writing class I taught with my colleague, Patrice Caldwell. "The Story Roger Never Told," to appear in an anthology in honor of Zelazny, came from knowing him and teaching his work.

One great attraction of science fiction has always been its freedom. There are no taboos. You can say nearly anything you like, so long as you can hold the reader's interest. That takes skill but also empathy. That's a sense for the feelings of others, the feelings of your characters, the gift for sharing those feelings with the reader.

Fred Pohl has said that writers share themselves. I think it's true, and perhaps the final secret of a long career. A good story becomes a bridge of identity, a way of sharing emotion and the illusion of significant experience between writer, character, and reader. Or so it seems to me.

In spite of all the contrary evidence that keeps piling up year by year, I'd like to hope that Arthur Clarke was right. Even if he wasn't, it has been a great game. I mean to keep at it as long as I can.

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Mary Soon Lee's last appearance in these pages was one of her SF stories, "Universal Grammar," just a few months ago. Now she proves herself to be equally adept with fantasy. The gentle tale that follows grew out of the writing workshop that she attends in Pittsburgh, where she lives.

Monstrosity

By Mary Soon Lee

A SEAGULL FLEW THROUGH Fera's dreams all that night. Its wings stirred the air over her head; its cry stirred a yearning she could not name.

Fera woke with that yearning, a wild, irrational thing that she thrust aside impatiently. Today would be as yesterday, and the day before, and the many years before that. Wishing wouldn't change that. She stood up from her bed, her claws clicking on the marble floor. Standing hurt her back. After a minute, she sank down onto four legs and padded into the bathroom.

Gold and silver fittings winked at her in the winter sunlight. The mosaic floor showed lilies and yellow roses, and the amethyst of the royal insignia. Only in the cobwebbed splinters of the fractured mirror did Fera see ugliness. She made herself stare at her shaggy, brutish reflection, as she had every day but the first — that long-ago day when she had torn through the castle, saliva slobbering down the matted fur of her face as she yowled in madness.

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Fera twisted the tap on with one awkward paw, and bent forward to let the water stream over her head. The chill water braced her, but something was wrong, an emptiness lurking inside her. With dripping wet fur, she paced out to the garden. Snow crusted the lawn, iced every twig and branch, frosted the edges of the winding paths.

At her coming, the birds flew away, calling out warnings to each other: *Alarm! Alarm! The monster approaches!*

Fera stalked across the snowy lawn, her damp fur clotting with frost in the piercing cold. She understood the birds' speech, and every warning call bit into her, hard though she tried to ignore them. But there was one friend who would listen to her without running away. She left the garden and entered the wood where Wolf lived.

"Wolf!" called Fera, her tail wagging in anticipation.

No answer.

"Wolf!" Still no answer. Fera stopped and sniffed the wind, scenting for Wolf. There, to the east. But there was another smell too, a human smell, and an iron undercurrent flavoring the air. Blood. She raced toward the smells. Intruder: there was a human intruder.

She came to a glade where a silver-gray carcass lay gutted on the ground, where an old man crouched over Wolf's body, the warm blood coating his fingers, a knife in his hand.

The man had not heard her approach. In a great leap Fera knocked him over. The knife dropped soundless into the snow. She opened her jaws over the wrinkled folds of the old man's thin neck.

"Please," croaked the old man. "Spare me."

And Fera paused, her teeth dimpling his skin. Maybe because he didn't struggle underneath her, maybe because it had been so long since a human had spoken to her, she raised her head and let the old man free. She covered the fallen knife with one heavy paw. "Why? Why should I spare you?"

The old man started as he heard her speak. He pushed himself into a sitting position, shivering. "I beg your forgiveness. I lost my way in the snowstorm. I was cold, I — "

"You trespassed on my lands and murdered my friend." Fera looked at Wolf's still body. Her throat closed up, and she could not speak.

The old man fumbled and pulled a leather bag from under his coat. "I have money I can give you in compensation — "

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Fera growled. "I don't want your money. You will come to my castle. If you are civil company, I shall let you live. If not — " She bared her teeth.

"But my sons," said the old man, "my sons are waiting for me. They will think me killed."

"I care not what they think," said Fera. With one claw, she ripped the gold chain that was all she wore from around her neck. Gently, she laid the chain on Wolf's open chest. Gently, she pressed her nose against his cold nose, and for the last time breathed in his deep, comforting odor.

Then she turned to the old man and bared her teeth again. "To the castle."

At supper that night, the old man sat at the opposite end of the banquet table. His eyes widened as he studied the crystal goblets, the green jade bowls resting on the jade plates. He didn't ask why the goblets were empty, the plates bare of food.

"Supper," said Fera. The banquet hall darkened for a moment, shadows appearing and disappearing in a heart's beat. When the light steadied, soup steamed in the bowls, roast beef waited on the plates, and raspberries and tangerines lay heaped beside jugs full of cream.

"That's a useful trick," the old man said dryly.

Fera grunted in reply. The old man was trying so hard not to show his discomfort with her, nor surprise at his surroundings. He had said nothing when he first entered the castle, but she had watched his gnarled fingers rub at the silks and jeweled ornaments, as if he didn't quite believe they were real.

Now she watched as he lifted his soup spoon and sipped at it. Lowering her own head, she licked up the soup from her bowl. Over the rim of her bowl, she eyed the old man. He looked at her, looked back at his soup, looked at her again, and then picked up his bowl and drank from it directly.

Fera raised her head, soup dribbling down her chin. "I won't be offended if you use the silverware."

"Perhaps not, but I'd feel awkward," said the old man. And when he'd finished the soup, he picked the meat and vegetables up in his fingers.

Neither of them spoke again until the meal was over. Then the old man said softly, "The wolf that I killed, could it speak too?"

"Aye." Fera stared fixedly at the white expanse of the tablecloth.

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"I am sorry," said the old man. "I would give much to undo that slaying."

Fera looked up from the tablecloth and met his gaze. "I would know your name."

"Petrov. And yours?"

"Fera."

"And your friend the wolf's?"

"I called him Wolf, nothing more." Silence fell between them again.

THE SILENCE stretched into the second day, and the third day, and the fourth, broken only when Fera ordered supper, or Petrov asked a simple question — where the towels were kept, or how he should clean his shirt.

They spent most of the time in the library. Fera paged clumsily through book after book. Sometimes she was distracted by Petrov shifting in his chair, and she would glare at him, all the more irritated if he was too absorbed in his reading to notice. Sometimes she stared out the tall narrow windows at the snow, remembering how Wolf tossed his head when he was amused, the way the coarse hairs of his coat had shaded from red-brown to silver-gray over the years.

On the fifth evening, Petrov looked up from a history book and asked quietly, "When may I go home?"

Fera growled deep in her throat but said nothing.

Firelight played in the hearth behind Petrov. He looked old and shrunken against the bright flames. "May I leave here in the spring?"

"No," said Fera. She gazed into the flames, seeing a silver-gray carcass spread-eagled in the snow.

"May I leave in the summer?"

"No," said Fera. "You killed my companion. Now you will keep me company."

Petrov raised his eyebrows. "Well, that makes perfect sense, seeing how much pleasure you're deriving from my company."

His tone was dry, but when he turned back to his book something in the set of his shoulders, in the way the lines pulled in around his eyes made him look sad. Fera shook her head impatiently: why should she care how

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the old man felt? She picked up her own book, but her muscles ached, and she couldn't find a comfortable position in the chair.

With a growl, she set the book down. "Do you play chess?"

Petrov nodded slowly.

"Will you play a game with me?"

Petrov nodded again. "I'd like that."

Fera showed him where the chess set was. Without any fuss Petrov set the pieces up, his gnarled hands still better suited to the task than Fera's paws. They played in silence, but Petrov smiled as he laid down his king at the end. "Good game. Do I get a return match?"

And so they played another game, and played again the next day. A week later they were varying chess with backgammon and cards; a week after that they discovered a mutual interest in mathematical digressions. On dry days they shared brief walks outside, Petrov cocooned in a ridiculous abundance of scarves and sweaters. When it snowed they wandered inside the castle.

Petrov liked to visit the art gallery on the second floor best. Each time the paintings were different, save for the one at the end of the first hallway: a portrait of a young girl with ivory-smooth skin, red lips curved in a smile, gold-bright hair. Petrov often paused there, and raised his eyebrows in question to Fera.

But the spell held Fera silent: she knew that once she had been the girl in the portrait, but she could not speak of it, could not say anything of her life before the curse was laid upon her.

In the third month of Petrov's stay, they were walking together in the garden. The lawn was mostly clear of snow, the air full of smells and growth and green. Fera sniffed busily, and pointed out the first crocuses, not yet in bloom.

Petrov beamed, his mouth crinkling at the corners. He sat down on a bench, and rubbed at his left knee. "Spring's my second favorite season. Do you have a favorite?"

"Summer." Fera growled softly, remembering warm nights spent in the woods, rolling over in the long sweet-scented grass.

"Summer's too hot and proud," said Petrov. "I liked it best when I was a child. Then when I was a young man, I switched to preferring winter, just because no one else liked it. My wife..." He stopped, and for a moment he

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looked frail and lost. "My wife liked autumn most, and now I do too, from harvest through to first snow. Crisp apples, the colors of the leaves, bonfire days. I remember her best in autumn."

Fera scowled, her insides knotting up. Petrov was unhappy and she, she felt guilty. But she shouldn't — he was the trespasser, the murderer. She thought of Wolf and tried to summon anger, but it twisted into grief. "I'll be back soon."

She left Petrov alone, and ran for the cover of the trees. There in the shadowy gloom, where the snow still lay on the ground, she paced back and forth. She'd take Petrov to the gallery again this afternoon. He'd put this mood behind him soon enough. She turned it over and over in her mind, but it was useless. Guilt still ate at her.

Finally, furious with herself, she galloped back to Petrov. "Go," she growled. A burning, prickling sensation tore at her insides. "You're free to leave. Take what you need from the castle — boots, food."

"My thanks." Petrov stood up. His face was stiff, unreadable. He laid one hand on her shaggy back. "I'll go home to my sons."

"Aye," said Fera. "Do that."

Petrov's hand tightened on her fur. "I'll miss you."

Fera stared at him, but none of what she wanted to say would emerge. In the end, she just muttered, "Go."

"I'll come back," said Petrov.

"There's no need." Fera turned and walked away.

In the weeks after Petrov departed, Fera stayed in the woods. She ate grubs and squirrels, mice and rabbits, taking fierce pleasure in their squeals as she caught them, savoring the blood-scent as she trapped small creatures in her claws.

She did not speak. She tried not to think in words. Words were sharp-edged, the broken halves of conversations. At night she slept in the glade with Wolf's body, by now a cage of bones open to the rain and wind, the two of them silent.

Gradually she lost track of time. It might have been a month later, it might have been two when she heard a distant clattering, the faint boom of the bell at the gate to her grounds.

Petrov. Fera raced for the gates, muscles pumping the long mile till she reached the iron gates.

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Outside stood a young, exquisitely handsome man. His full lips curled in disgust as he looked at Fera, then altered to a forced smile. He held out one smooth white hand in greeting. "Good day, milady. My name is Omegon, son of Petrov." He pulled his hand back after barely brushing Fera's extended paw.

"Petrov's son," said Fera, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice. "Come in."

"Why, thank you. I was passing by, and, since my father has told me so much about you, I thought I should pass on his good wishes." Omegon gestured behind him at a black horse and two saddlebags. "If you would see that my belongings are taken care of."

Fera stepped toward the horse, and watched it skitter backward. "Maybe Petrov forgot to mention that most animals are scared of me. You will have to take the horse to the stables yourself."

"Very well," said Omegon, but two spots of high color stood out beneath his elegant cheekbones, and Fera didn't like his peevish tone. Indeed, apart from his appearance, she wasn't sure that she liked this young man at all. But she thought of his father and tried to stay civil.

"The stables are over there," she said. "I'll be waiting for you at the main entrance to the castle."

Ten minutes later, Omegon joined her at the castle doors. His mouth opened to a red "O" as he took in the marble hallway rising to the wide curve of the mahogany stairs. He swiveled his head to study the ornate ceilings, the details picked out in gold and silver, the sculptures and paintings, and the fifteen-foot tall crystal windows.

His delicate pink tongue licked his lips once. "I see my father did not exaggerate the beauty of your castle." After a moment's hesitation, he added, "Or of your gracious ladyship, of course."

Fera snorted before she could control herself. Petrov would never have described her as beautiful: sturdy, maybe, or muscular. Recovering some of her manners, she asked, "Have you journeyed far? Are you hungry?"

"Two days' ride, and I confess I am a little hungry."

Fera led him to the dining hall. Her feet left muddy tracks on the floor, and she was acutely aware that she must smell like a barnyard. She noticed Omegon's nose wrinkle once or twice, but when he was seated at the far end of the banquet table, he seemed to relax. Indeed his eyes

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positively sparkled after Fera had said "Dinner" and the dishes had filled with food. He took out a thin leather book from his pocket and flicked through the pages.

"What is that?" asked Fera.

He flushed. "Nothing, just a hobby of mine. I, ah, study the lore of enchantments."

"I've studied the history of enchantments, too, though I have been unable to find any texts that contain much more than hearsay." Fera leaned forward in her eagerness, a chunk of meat dangling forgotten from her claw. She caught a glimpse of the cover — illustrated with something that looked like a frog — before Omegon thrust the book away.

"I'm sure my humble book wouldn't interest you, milady." His knuckles whitened on his silverware, and he sliced one neat portion of meat. He lifted the meat on his fork, and elegantly swallowed it. Taking a sip of wine, he added, "Has anyone ever told your ladyship how eloquent your eyes are?"

Fera snorted. "I wouldn't have guessed that Petrov would teach his sons to be flatterers. Or did you come by it naturally?"

Omegon had the grace to look discomfited. "It's not, that is, I do realize your ladyship's appearance is unusual. But there can be much beauty in the unexpected."

Fera blinked. In the long-ago, men had whispered to her such sweet things as this young man did. But now, now either he had too much wine, or he was shortsighted, or he was a liar. She found herself hoping it was one of the first two. Even if only for one evening, she would like to be able to pretend that she was beautiful again.

Omegon stood up, and rested his arms on the back of his chair. Smiling at her, he started to sing. "A flower in a garden, a jewel in a crown, ten thousand look for beauty where they know it will be found."

His voice was pure and rich, taking the simple tune and giving it depth. Fera closed her eyes and listened.

"A princess in a palace, a rainbow in the sky, let thousands look for beauty where they know it will be found. But I would see the cactus bloom, and I would see you smile, and know your love I'd found."

Warm, sweet breath wafted over her face. Fera opened her eyes just in time to see Omegon lower his lips to hers, and she believed, yes, she

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believed that he loved her, as youth must surely sometimes love, wildly and without rational cause.

For one moment his mouth pressed against hers, and then he stepped backward, his expression darkening. "You look just the same!"

Fera touched her lips with the edge of one paw, probing the spot where he had touched her. There was a huskiness to her voice that she didn't recognize. "How else would I look?"

The young man sank into a chair, and buried his face in his hands. "Beautiful, like a princess. My father was right. I'm nothing but a fool."

The thin book slipped onto the table, and Fera saw the title "On Enchantments to Recover Ensorceled Princesses. From Frog Princesses to Beasts."

She laughed, because anything else would have been too painful, and because she had been as much of a fool as this young man. More so, since she was old enough to know better. Not every curse can be lifted, even by a young man's kiss. "At least," said Fera finally, "you sing well."

Face still hidden in his hands, Omegon muttered, "I am sorry, Fera, for lying to you. I, I think I'd like to leave now."

And he ran from the hall without another word.

Fera waited for him at the main gate, the book clutched tight in one paw. "I believe you forgot this."

"Thank you." He hesitated. "That song, my father made it up when he came home. He thinks you found him too old and too boring. He thinks that's why you sent him away, but he never stops talking about you, on and on and on." The peevish note had returned to Omegon's voice, but Fera barely noticed.

Something stirred in her, wildly and without rational cause. "Tell him I miss him. Tell him I would like it if he came to visit."

And on a day in early summer, not so many weeks later, Petrov came riding to the castle. His hair was gray and his skin was wrinkled, and his knuckles were swollen with arthritis. But Fera found him beautiful enough. And if, in the darkness of some night, they held each other close for comfort, it is none of our concern.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

SOMETHING a little different this time. Usually I pick the books I'll review for this column from among all of those that show up in my P.O. box throughout the month up until my deadline. But this time — simply as an exercise in forestalling my own biases, if nothing else — I decided to review the first three books to come in after turning in my last column (the deadline for which was February 21st). The only caveat was that they couldn't be media-based or series books.

This isn't because I'm particularly against either of the latter, though I do have reservations with them. What troubles me about media-based books is that there is no character growth — there can't be. If the character changes, the franchise will no longer have its recognizable icon for further books, movies, etc. So what normally propels a novel is absent and we are left with a story that is solely event-driven. This can be entertaining, certainly, but I would be no more happy with a steady diet of them than I would be eating the same thing every day.

Series books present another problem. While they can have character growth, too often they begin with a bang, and then fizzle out after a book or two. They might have a great opening premise, an extraordinary character, a fascinating new world, sometimes all of the above, but the appeal is in the originality. Once familiarity sets in, what seemed so fresh has become old hat, and this reader, at least, quickly grows tired. The series that keep my interest are usually those where the setting itself is the continuing thread (Norton's Witchworld, Holdstock's Mythago Wood) and the stories concern a new cast each time out. When old faces reappear, it's more often only as secondary characters.

Be that as it may, I don't think any less of the authors writing either,

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or of the readers who enjoy the end result of that authorial labor. And for our present purposes it struck me as unfair to judge a series on only one book, while let's face it, the media-based material is going to sell regardless of what any reviewer or critic might have to say about them, and the point of this column is to bring to your attention something that you might otherwise miss.

But I've digressed enough. Let's have a look at those three books.

As She Climbed Across the Table, by Jonathan Lethem, Doubleday, 1997, $22.95

This is, without question, one of the oddest books I've read in a while. Two threads run through it. In one, a physicist, while trying to create a secondary universe, has succeeded instead in making a hole in this universe, a "Lack" through which items can be passed, but not reclaimed. The other thread concerns the viewpoint character, Philip Engstrand, a professor who studies other professors, and his obsessive fixation on Alice Coombs, one of the physicists involved in the Lack project. What Engstrand has to deal with is that his erstwhile lover Coombs has left him for her own obsessive fixation on the Lack.

It's a great opening premise and Lethem goes on to introduce a number of potentially fascinating characters and humorous situations, setting them up so that they should bounce off each other like balls in a pinball machine. Yet for all the potential, the characters come off flat, which in turn renders both the humorous and more poignant moments less effective than they might be. The characters' reactions are distanced and cerebral — even in what should be highly charged, emotional situations — and while this coolness says something about contemporary society, and the microcosm of it as found in a university setting, it grows tiresome experiencing it at novel length.

The book's saving grace is the fascinating discussion that arises from time to time on the nature of reality and the dynamics of couples, but mostly I found the novel confusing.

Or perhaps I simply didn't get it.

The Duke of Sumava, by Sarah J. Wrench, Baen Books, 1997, $5.99

Set in Eastern Europe during the Thirty Years War, *The Duke of Sumava* initially appears to be part

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of that subgenre of folklore in which mortals make a deal with faerie and/or the leader of the Wild Hunt.

Unhorsed and close to death in the wild forest that makes up much of his small dukedom of Sumava, Duke Ottokar sends out a call for help to anything that will listen. Much to his surprise, his summoning is answered by the leader of the Wild Hunt, a faerie healer, and the forest itself. The enemy is temporarily driven off and Ottokar is healed of his wounds, but then Ottokar realizes he might have traded away his mortal soul in defense of his beloved homeland. And he still has two immense invading armies to drive off.

At this point it seems rather obvious what will happen next, but happily the author proves more inventive. Wrench quickly deals with the "sold one's soul to the devil" plot line and, while much of the book does concern Ottokar's struggle to keep his country free from outside invaders, the book's overall focus is more on Ottokar's interaction with Faerie — not merely to solve his immediate problems, but over the long term.

In fact, *The Duke of Sumava* doesn't read so much like a novel as it does a fictional biography, which is a good thing since Wrench's matter-of-fact prose style and fairly basic characterization lends itself well to the latter. This isn't to say that the book reads like some dry historical treatise. There is much here to engage the reader — a cumulative effect of incidents and effects, rather than a tightly focused single plot thread — and Wrench also presents some intriguing takes on various elements of folklore, religion, and how her characters view them.

Three in Time: Classic Novels of Time Travel, edited by Jack Dann, Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski, White Wolf, 1997, $14.99

I'm a sucker for time travel stories, from H.G. Wells, through Jack Finney, to Terence Green's *Shadow of Ashland*, discussed here at this time last year. So I'm delighted to see the first of this new "Rediscovery" series of classic novels from White Wolf focusing on time travel. The omnibus features three complete novels along with introductions by the series editors to give some background on the authors and to help put the books in context of the times when they were originally published.

The lead offering is *The Winds of Time*, by Chad Oliver, and at this

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point I have to shamefully admit to being unfamiliar with his work. Judging by the quality of this novel, I'm hard-pressed to understand how I missed him when his books were first coming out.

The Winds of Time is both a time travel and a first contact novel. While on a fishing vacation, Wes Chase takes shelter in a cave only to be kidnapped by a gaunt, white-faced stranger who renders him immobile with a stun gun. Chase is dragged into a deeper part of the cave, blocked off from the outside world by a metal door with a complex locking mechanism. There he sees that his captor is not alone. There are five niches carved out of the stone wall of the cave, with apparently sleeping figures in four of them.

Over the course of his lengthy captivity, Chase is forced to teach his captor English and eventually discovers that not only are the man and his companions extraterrestrials, but they first arrived on this planet over fifteen thousand years ago. The story-within-a-story related by Chase's captor is a fascinating read and makes for a nice turnabout on the usual plot of an earthman landing on some distant planet peopled by primitives. Here, our ancestors are the primitives.

The Winds of Time has all the ingredients of a solid sf novel: a riveting story, quality prose, believable characters, and solid extrapolation of its scientific speculation. And except for some quaint mannerisms of its protagonist, it's as readable and immediate today as it was when it was first published in 1957.

Published by itself, it would be well worth picking up. When combined with Wilson Tucker's classic *The Year of the Quiet Sun* and Poul Anderson's equally engrossing *There Will Be Time*, as it is here, the resulting omnibus is a treasure trove of classic gems that unquestionably deserve to be rediscovered by a new generation of readers.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Black Wine, by Candas Jane Dorsey, Tor Books, $22.95

The Prestige, by Christopher Priest, St. Martin's Press, $24.95

Burning Your Boats, The Collected Short Stories of Angela Carter, Henry Holt & Company, $30.00, Penguin Books, $14.00

PERIODICALLY, like mournful wolves in full cry at a moon they can never bring to bay, reviewers or academics will lament the death of the Novel of Ideas, that literary nostrum so beloved of the critical establishment. In fact, the Novel of Ideas never died; merely underwent the laser surgery and verbal liposuction necessary to transform it from a late Victorian and early-twentieth-century lady of manners — refined, exquisitely put-together, and rather (shhh!) dull — into her millenary counterpart: sleek and sexually savvy, sporting the elastic gear and pop exuberance of science fiction, her Higher Education safely hidden beneath a veneer tattooed with the century's intellectual watermarks: Marxism, structuralism, feminism, post-modernism.

It ain't news that when it comes to acceptance (or even acknowledgment) by the critical mainstream, science fiction sucks hind tit (and fantasy pretty much dies stillborn). An exception is speculative fiction willing to fight for a cause — *what* cause doesn't really matter, so long as the banner is colorful and held high for all to see. *1984*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Samuel R. Delany's Nevèrÿon books — all are didactic novels given the imprimatur "classic" and kept in print by virtue of becoming part of that ambiguous literary canon, novels taught in high school and college English classes. All are fine novels, and *1984* is one of the great books of the century; but are they in fact

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more deserving of attention than *The Book of the New Sun, Engine Summer, Sarah Canary, The Course of the Heart*? What of Delany's brilliant, unfinished diptych that began with *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*? Or the linked novellas Le Guin published as *Four Ways to Forgiveness*?

Ah well. Acceptance into the canon carries both reward and punishment — yesterday a young man complained to me about having to read *The Fellowship of the Ring* for credit — and we should probably be grateful that anyone is *having* ideas these days, let alone *writing* about them. Which brings me to Candas Jane Dorsey's exceptional, and exceptionally ambitious, first novel, *Black Wine*. It is a novel of ideas, deftly woven and quite beautifully written, very much in the mode of Ursula Le Guin's early books, and should not go begging for readers.

In a tirelessly anachronistic future world that is probably our own, an amnesiac woman named Essa stitches together her own history from the fragments she recalls of her earlier life, as well as those of her mother, grandmother, and daughter. Essa's history is intricate — she is the fugitive daughter of the melancholic queen of an unhappy land where power runs through the distaff line — and made even more convoluted by her amnesia (nasty fall from a dirigible, subsequent clumsy trepanning, and finally some decent laser surgery), which results in the creation of a secondary personality named Fierce-frightened. Fierce-frightened is a slave, not because her nature is slavish (now, *that* might have been a nice trope on *Sybil*), but because, post-head-trauma, Essa has been captured and sold as a slave in the very palace where she was born to rule, the very palace she fled as a girl years before. There, Fierce-frightened ends up serving the wicked regent who was betrothed to the infant Essa. In true fairy-tale fashion, his kiss awakens princess Essa's consciousness where it sleeps within the slave Fierce-frightened, and the reborn monarch must determine how best to rule the land which is hers — if, indeed, she chooses to become its ruler at all.

Dorsey (who is a poet and editor as well as novelist) writes a lovely, fluid, dreamlike prose. The shifts in point-of-view, from Essa to Fierce-frightened to the older Essa (among others), are beautifully done, and amount to a tour de force of narrative voices. But they are also confusing, and the confusion is heightened by Dorsey's choice of

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character names: Essa, Ea, Elta, F., XX. Her intent, as with *Black Wine*'s generic science fantasy backdrop, is no doubt to invoke a sense of timelessness, a hallmark of the sf novel of ideas. Instead it undercuts the immediacy of her world, makes it seem a mere playing-board where XX and Essa and the rest are moved about, brightly colored representations of Ideas: Slavery, Democracy, Fascism, Child Neglect and Abuse, Freedom.

Dorsey herself seems aware of this: at one point, a character laments, "'Oh, expository lump!...We've been talking about it too long. When you write your book about it, this is the part that is going to sound really boring.'" And while Dorsey is, ultimately, preaching to the choir (Slavery, Fascism, Abuse: BAD. *VERY* BAD. Care to offer a dissenting view?), she ends her book with a heartbreaking scene of individual liberation: Essa embracing her other selves, as well as the wicked regent, the mother who abandoned her and the abusive grandmother who is the novel's demonic materfamilias. In this ultimate vision of transcendence and forgiveness, *Black Wine* becomes strong stuff, indeed.

Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* is another novel that derives much of its narrative fire from shifting points of view — in this case, the voices of two professional magicians whose bitter, almost insane, rivalry poisons not only their own lives but those of their descendents.

Alfred Borden, son of a wheelwright, is Le Professeur de la Magie; the aristocrat Rupert Angier is his nemesis, The Great Danton. Their careers form parallel arcs across Victorian England — a wonderful staging ground for magicians, spiritualists, mesmerists, scientists, hypocrites. To varying degrees, Borden and Angier are all of the above, as well as cozy adulterers (each keeps a mistress, as well as a wife and children). But mostly, Borden and Angier are adversaries, their mutual rivalry honed to a fatal edge through a series of mishaps, misplaced efforts at reconciliation, professional jealousies, and pure spleen.

A tragic accident spurs the fledgling illusionists into lifelong battle. In their ceaseless professional struggle for pre-eminence, the magicians over time begin to mirror each other, stealing tricks and repartee, lovers and lovely assistants, all the while attempting to create a stage illusion that will trump all that have come before. So

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it is that Borden develops first The Transported Man and then The New Transported Man, illusions in which the magician is instantaneously transmitted from one onstage cabinet to another thirty feet away. Angier is baffled and infuriated by the trick, and his own popularity begins to slide in the wake of Le Professeur de Magie's grand success with The New Transported Man. It is not until Borden meets up with that pioneering electrical genius, Nikola Tesla (Edison got all the glory, but the maverick Tesla is beloved of contemporary novelists), that he finally comes up with his own ultimate illusion, an extrapolation of The New Transported Man which Angier calls In A Flash. Ah, but there is a horrific price to pay for Tesla's sublime device, and Angier finds himself paying it, onstage for sell-out crowds, night after night after night.

There is a certain amount of grim humor to *The Prestige*, the blatant Can-You-Top-*This*? careerism of dueling prestidigitators whose feud is carried out against the lush backdrop of *fin-de-siecle* London. And the novel provides the pleasures of a mystery as well, as the reader attempts to find the man (or men) behind the curtain, and discover the true parentage of Andrew Westley, who may or may not be related to Borden.

But at its core *The Prestige* is a horror novel, and a particularly terrifying one because its secret is revealed so slowly, and in such splendid language. Priest traces the moral decay of these two demonic creatures with the precision and intensely focused intelligence of a surgeon baring a diseased corpus to an intern: See? here is the twisted cell that poisoned its fellow organs, and here is the heart laid waste by neglect and deceit, and here the damaged brain that gave shape to such monstrous thoughts. And there is a particularly nightmarish scene that may leave sensitive parents extremely reluctant to patch up any differences between warring families. Priest is a superb writer (the book won both the James Tait Black and World Fantasy Awards). His prose is elegant and exquisitely understated, and leaves one with the very real impression of having witnessed the bravura illusions he describes with such economy. There are a few minor flaws, lapses of logic and continuity that are mildly distracting, on a par with the illusionist's doves losing a few feathers in flight. But ultimately, *The Prestige* is both disturbing and exhilarating — one closes the book

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shaken, wondering how it was done; and eager to see what the master illusionist will produce for his next trick.

Finally, there is *Burning Your Boats*, a posthumous collection of Angela Carter's short stories. If Tolkien introduced fantastic literature to the twentieth century on a grand scale, then Carter gave it an education and made it respectable, but without sacrificing the supreme and occasionally scatological audacity that distinguished her work from the beginning. Sexy, garish, fiercely intelligent, and often contentious, Carter's tales are at once sophisticated and earthy — one thinks of those highly colored aristocrats beloved of Carnaby Street in the 1960s, dropping ashes from a spliff onto the priceless Pucci tunic, sipping electric Kool-Aid from a gold-rimmed Limoges tea-cup. Judging from "The Man Who Loved a Double Bass," published in *Storyteller Contest* in 1962, Carter seems to have sprung full-blown from the head of some mythical, sometimes pixilated raconteur, the spiritual godchild of Isak Dinesen and P. T. Barnum. Her later works are so well known as to almost not need introducing: the erotic memoirs of *Fireworks*, the gothic *Black Venus*, and most of all the groundbreaking recidivist fairy tales of *The Bloody Chamber*, which opened the door for countless stories, novels, plays, and films by other writers who set out to remake classic folktales in their own image.

In his moving introduction to *Burning Your Boats*, Carter's longtime friend Salman Rushdie notes that she is at present "the contemporary writer most studied at British universities." She is well-represented within the academy here also, largely by virtue of the unrepentant feminism that colors her writing. But Carter is no tyro virago. In her acidly lubricious science fiction novel *The Passion of New Eve*, one sees the author as Equal Opportunity Destroyer, laying waste to sexism, cinema, and serial killers with a glee I don't think I've ever encountered in another book: I swear you can hear her whooping as you read.

Her short stories are wonderful — better than her novels, some people think, because more controlled and far-ranging, from the hushed delirium of "The Loves of Lady Purple" to the elegiacal (and hilarious) "Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." The tales in *The Bloody Chamber* have become modern

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classics: the title story "Bluebeard," with an unexpected ending courtesy of The Mother to End All Mothers; the sexually charged "The Tiger's Bride," with its gorgeous final sentences; "The Company of Wolves," which became the Neil Jordan film. One of the joys of *Burning Your Boats* is seeing how, in her later stories, Carter amuses herself, as in "John Ford's *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*"; "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost," a three-tiered trope upon "Cinderella" and "The Juniper Tree"; and "In Pantoland," a loving and irreverent paean to traditional English pantomime, with its dancing cows and valiant cats and Principal Boys whose jostling breasts betray them.

If there is any lament to be made about this collection, it is the obvious one: that Angela Carter died far too young, in 1992 at the age of fifty-one. She casts a long, long shadow, both for those of us who love to read the literature of the fantastic, and those who strive to write it. It is still too sad to think, even now, that there will be no more books, no more tales by our century's Scheherazade. So one imagines her somewhere in Pantoheaven, gleefully blowing sparks upon all those dissertations being written in her name.

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EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

MAYBE IT'S a sign of the encroaching millennium. This month's reading pile has a lot of apocalypses in it.

Most of them can be found in *Revelations* (HarperPrism), Douglas E. Winter's terrific new anthology. This one clearly is inspired by the approach of the year 2000, as the stories count down the twentieth century decade by decade, from Joe Lansdale's look at the early days of boxing to Richard Christian Matheson's 1970s rock scene through to Clive Barker's vision of the second coming. *Revelations* is one of the rare theme anthologies in which the theme amplifies the individual stories (rather than limiting them) and with such good stories to start with, it's saying a lot to call this book more than the sum of its parts.

The other big apocalypse of this month coincidentally comes from our other new book reviewer, Elizabeth Hand. In *Glimmering* (HarperPrism), her finest novel to date, she envisions a future nearly upon us in which global warming and solar storms produce the Glimmering.

The third apocalyptic vision is one of this century's major ones: J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (Noonday Press) brilliantly blurred the distinctions between human and machine a decade before the cyberpunk movement arrived. Read the book *and* see David Cronenberg's powerful film adaptation...and then observe the people around you and see where their machines stop and they begin.

Speaking of machines and humans, Rudy Rucker's *Freeware* (Avon Books) takes even further the wild extrapolations of *Software* (1982) and *Wetware* (1988). This time out, Rucker imagines "moldies" — evolved robots made of algae and soft plastics — and warps through some wild scenarios Mother would never approve of.

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While the book stands on its own, you'll do best to read the first two books in order to follow the chronology, and as always with Rucker's novels, you'll do well if you're ready to accept almost anything.

Those of you who enjoyed R. Garcia y Robertson's "The Moon Maid" last year will be pleased to see he has worked it into a new novel, *Atlantis Found* (AvoNova), which takes moderns back through time for a first-rate tale of men who would be gods.

Among the annual anthologies, the Nebula volume always offers an interesting counterpoint to the "Year's Best" collections. *Nebula Awards 31* (Harcourt Brace), edited by Pamela Sargent, deftly mixes Nebula winners and nominees with essays and articles into a rewarding volume.

And returning to the theme of humanity and machines, Geoff Ryman's *253* (www.ryman-novel.com) is a fascinating internet work that should wear the word "novel" loosely. *253* tells the stories of each of the 253 passengers (well, 252 and the operator) on the London underground train running from Embarkment Station to Elephant and Castle. Each character portrait is itself comprised of 253 words, so they make for quick reading (a real virtue on the screen). Clever and far less static than the idea of it sounds, *253* is a terrific verbal tapestry of life in the early days of the Electronic Age. And readers are welcome to contribute to the next two cars. Hop on.

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Jonathan Lethem was recently picked by Newsweek *magazine to be one of the 100 Americans to watch for in the next century. His most recent novel is* As She Climbed Across the Table. *Angus MacDonald is the editor of* California Entertainment Review *and has published criticism and articles in the* Whole Earth Review, Music Poll 5000, *and elsewhere. They note that a previous draft of this story bore the title "Chopping Broccoli." (Don't ask me why—I just work here.)*

The Edge of the Bed of Forever

By Jonathan Lethem and Angus MacDonald

STRAND KNEW HIS WIFE would soon notice how terribly old he was getting. It was only a matter of time. Lingering before his bathroom mirror, he catalogued the ravages. The yellow of his eyes, the white stubble growing up under, and out of, his nose, the saggy pouches of skin accumulating around his jaw. There was no mistaking it. He was pulling away from his wife, agewise. And soon it would be obvious to her.

Using the time platform had been a dirty little secret from the beginning, but at the beginning he had had it under control. Now he was spending as much time in no-time with Angela as he was back here in realtime with his wife. And it was turning him into an old man. He had no right to call himself forty-five anymore. He had lost track long before, but he was surely at least fifty by now, biologically.

He opened the medicine cabinet and took out his bottle of dye — disguised as a solution for remetabolizing corns — and began combing it into his hair. A new irony occurred to him. His wife could save him. By

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noticing his aging, and accusing him of the adultery, she would put the stop to it that he couldn't himself. His lover, youthful, life-giving Angela, was killing him, and only his wife could save him.

He finished, mussing his hair so it wouldn't look too combed. Downstairs his wife waited for him to join her in the large kitchen. He heard her. She was working already, piling the cotton shirts she and Strand would decorate with commercial logos today. All would be spotlessly clean, ready for the inking microbes they'd prepared the afternoon before. She would keep stacking them, silently reproachful, while he read his newsclod.

Finally, dressed, showered, every hair in or out of place as required, he descended the stairs.

"Good morning," she said, too brightly. The further apart they grew the more blandly cheerful she acted. She turned at the waist, without removing her hands from the long workbench. "How long have you been up?"

Strand glanced at his watch, resisting the impulse to tell a meaningless lie. "Just half an hour," he said. "Here, there's plenty of time. Come and sit."

"In a minute." She continued stacking shirts.

Strand opened the front door, picked up the newsclod lying on the welcome mat, and brought it inside. He emptied it from its packet into the basin hidden under the table and leaned back in his seat, waiting for the enzymes to decode the day's events and display the front page on the screen above the counter. The image that appeared, however, was unintelligible, shot through with colored streaks and abbreviated words. Strand picked up the packet and examined it. A muddy claw mark pierced the back. A cat or raccoon had eaten part of the news. Strand would have to go without his usual dose of headlines. He was surprised to find he didn't care. He felt something like relief, in fact, as he dumped the spoiled news into a house plant's soil.

"Angela," he said, "did you make any coffee?"

He winced in pain. He had called Miriam "Angela." The name hung in the air, irretrievable. A disaster.

Amazing. He switched labels on bottles, spent thousands of dollars renting a room in no-time, and hid a time machine around the house. All

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this, all the subterfuge and contortion, only to call his wife by his mistress's name.

"Yes," she said distantly. "Here you go." Strand fought to keep his features from simply melting into a lump on his face as she set coffee in front of him. Would she throw the cup in his lap? Or had she somehow not heard?

"Thanks," he said, gulping, struggling to return her slight smile. "Uh, milk?" He rose to get the creamer from the appliance alcove.

"Yes, of course." Another smile. She really hadn't noticed.

He'd gotten away with it. "No news?"

He allowed himself a small lie — just an omission, really — as reward for getting through the crisis. "I wasn't in the mood," he said.

Strand had only been to the offices of NoTime, Inc., once, years before, to set up the account when he and Angela began their affair. He'd arranged then to have the daily code updates delivered to a storefront maildrop so Miriam wouldn't see them. When he left the house today Miriam showed little curiosity. His painstakingly rehearsed speech about a visit to the podiatrist had done the trick.

Since his first visit to NoTime, the company had grown. The offices were newly plush, the receptionist newly professional, her short dark hair styled and lacquered. Strand had flirted with her on his first visit. Today she was almost icy. She directed Strand to a waiting area across the room, and he sat across from the only other client there, a young man with a fashionable slush hat and heavy, tired eyes. A sagging rucksack took up the seat beside him.

The man was drawing a diagram on a scrap of paper on the table between them. Strand leaned forward to catch a glimpse. A problem in Radial Bowls. It looked like the man — little more than a boy — was sketching alternate aiming strategies, based on which of the 4,320 target regions his opponent seized.

"I used to play a little Radial," Strand said, as cheerily as possible.

"I'm the regional NCAA champion," came the reply, in a distracted monotone. His voice was quiet.

"No."

"Yes," said the man, a little defensively. "I'm Zip Lignorelli." He

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looked up and stared at Strand. "I've been playing for State since I was a freshman. Youngest champion ever."

Strand recognized the boy's face. "You were on the newsclod yesterday. You won — no, you lost a pasture."

"I lost. I'm losing four pastures to one."

"What are you doing here?"

Zip took a deep breath and leaned back. "It's kinda stupid. Maybe I shouldn't be talking to you — "

"You rent no-time," said Strand. The logic of it was obvious. "You work on your moves for Radial. You beat the time clock."

"You — you a reporter?"

"Relax. Your secret's safe with me. Where do you hide the — "

Zip put a finger to his lips and smiled painfully. "Shhh. In the bathroom of the stadium." He sighed deeply and looked at the ceiling, then back at Strand. "It's not for the game, though. I got orals, for the baccalaureate, y'know? Coming up. During the nationals for Radial." He looked at his shoes and laughed. "Something had to give, right?"

"That's brilliant," said Strand. "What's the matter?"

Zip sighed again, and cast his eyes down.

"You're losing," said Strand. "The other one, what's her name, Andreyeva, she's better." He marveled at Lignorelli. So young, so wrapped up in sport. He wanted to urge him to forget the game and find himself a warm, loving female, but he wasn't sure the student, with his flip manner and self-absorption, would know how.

"I'll lose. I think you're right. It's either that or put my full attention to it and flunk the orals."

"Does anyone know you come here? What — "

Zip shook his head slightly and lowered his voice. "I'm by myself. Came in today 'cause I wanna different room."

Strand started to ask: what room? Then he saw that Zip meant his room in the no-time hotel.

What a funny idea. The rooms, as everyone knew, were all alike.

" — I kinda want one with a window, right?" The kid presented his case as though Strand worked for NoTime, Inc. "The room's so plain, y'know? No window, can't think. Going crazy. I could use just a little view. Even a fence or an access road or something..."

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"You poor guy," said Strand gently. "The hotel is what they call a time-station, like a space station. It's just hanging there, you see. Adjacent to our world."

He took the paper and pen away from Zip and drew a little diagram: a building suspended in space. "It's hanging out in no-time. There's no view. If it were in the world, with a view, then time would be passing. Understand?"

"Oh," said Zip. He looked down, then clapped his hands to his knees. "Well, that's that."

"Mr. Lignorelli," the receptionist called out. "Mr. Axelrod will see you now."

Zip looked at Strand with panic in his eyes, then obediently rose from his seat and stepped over to the desk. Strand, feeling protective, followed.

"I gotta, I mean, you can cancel my appointment," said Zip. The woman narrowed her eyes. Strand remembered again how bubbly she'd been when NoTime was a new operation.

"It's okay," he said. "I helped him with a question he was going to ask Axelrod. It's all cleared up."

The receptionist paused long enough to make sure Strand knew she thought this was improper. "I guess that makes it your turn, Mr. Strand. You've saved yourself some waiting."

Strand turned to shake hands with Zip. "Good luck," he said.

"Thanks," said Zip. "Uh, good luck to you too." He moved toward the elevators as Strand was ushered into Axelrod's office.

"I had the idea," said Strand, after he and Axelrod introduced themselves, "that I could somehow lure my wife, unawares, into a room in the hotel — perhaps in a sleep-state, or hypnotized — and get her to pass a couple of years. Do you follow me?"

"You're concerned with the age differential," said Axelrod with a tight smile. "I understand you perfectly." He passed a hand smoothly over his thinning hair. "It's a very exciting suggestion, Mr. Strand. It also, if I read you correctly, constitutes kidnapping." He looked down at his desk, then back up at Strand. "No, worse, I think. It's really a variant of murder."

"Oh," said Strand, stupefied.

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Axelrod pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Please — don't feel I've accused — "

"Oh, no," said Strand. "You're absolutely right. I just hadn't thought — it was a stupid idea." Silent panic coated his nerves with ice.

Axelrod regained his poise. "It's far from — " He coughed, then went on. "The ramifications often escape the layman, Mr. Strand. That's what we're here for." He smiled again, this time with something like warmth. "Richard — may I call you Richard? — you're one of our oldest non-commercial accounts. We're quite aware of your consistent use of your room in the hotel, and we want to help. I'm surprised, frankly, that we didn't hear from you sooner. This type of thing is our third-ranking customer concern."

"Oh," said Strand again. The cold subsided, leaving lukewarm sweat.

"I'm sure you realize that the effects you're concerned with are irreversible. My counsel to you is going to be very simple, and you may find it disappointing." Axelrod folded his hands. "Just because you're keeping the room doesn't mean you've got to use it every day, Richard. Ease up. Spend less time there when you go. Because otherwise — "

Axelrod turned his palms outward in a gesture of helplessness. Strand realized now that he had been counting on Axelrod's providing some answer, some counter-spell to NoTime's original magic. He wanted a refund on his lost time, wanted everyone but him to spend ten years in the hotel while he caught up. He wanted to be young again, even young and stupid, like Zip Lignorelli, instead of old and stupid, like himself.

He was suddenly aware that his face was covered with tears. Axelrod was sympathetic now. "Here," he said. He opened a desk drawer, brought out a mirror strewn with chamomile and handed Strand a slip of paper rolled into a tube.

Strand tried to snort, but his nose was clogged from weeping. He mimed satisfaction for Axelrod's sake and slid the tray back across the desk.

The waiting room was empty as Strand went to the elevator. He stopped at the table, hoping to retrieve the Radial Bowls diagram as a memento of his encounter with Zip. Instead he found a booklet with code updates for the NoTime hotel. It was the first Strand had ever seen besides

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his own. Apart from an unfamiliar account number at the top, it could have been his own.

Zip had left it behind. With a guilty look over his shoulder — the receptionist was busy with papers on her desk — Strand slipped it into his pocket, then hurried to the elevator.

STRAND ENDURED a lengthy dinner with Miriam, the whole time glancing surreptitiously at his watch. He and Angela had a date this evening, in the hotel, and he was eager for relief from the pressures of the day. Miriam wouldn't stop talking, either about new commercial clients they'd already snared or about the comic strip panels that had turned up on some of the house plants' leaves.

Before dessert, he carried the dishes into the kitchen. After arranging them on the dishwasher's tongue, he picked up the compost bag and went out back. Once he'd dropped the bag in the bin by the back fence, he crept into the storage shed, laid his wristwatch across the hibernating lawnmower's muzzle, and unfolded the time platform hidden in an old box of automobile parts. He took the code update from his pocket and was about to punch in the figures when he noticed the strange number at the top of the printout. It was Zip's.

Odd, he thought. What would have happened?

Strand conceived uneasily that he would have traveled into the student champion's past, or rather, dragged Zip into his future. For while Strand would have been perfectly able to jump back to his original point of departure and finish his meal with Miriam, Zip would have been forced to jump ahead to that point too. The computer that regulated the jumping enforced this rule. You couldn't use the hotel to go back in time. Zip would have walked into the bathroom of the contest hall and vanished for days. Strand would have destroyed the kid's careers, both athletic and academic.

And it had nearly happened.

Strand repocketed Zip's code, found his own, fresh from his maildrop, and entered the numerals.

He was transported instantly. But the room was empty. No Angela.

There was no being late for a rendezvous in the NoTime hotel, by

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definition. Angela's absence meant she hadn't used this code in the past and would not use it in the future — if she had she would be here with him at the start of the booking.

The day was a double loss, this new disappointment punctuating the earlier one. Strand felt profoundly old and tired.

He knew to return immediately, to avoid logging any useless time here at the hotel. When he materialized in the shed, his mood lifted slightly. He always felt relief at returning to "normal" life after a clandestine sojourn in the hotel. His watch was warm from the lawnmower's breath. He strapped it onto his wrist and went inside to have dessert with Miriam.

The next day Strand caught a bus to Zip's college. His newsclod had said the match was suspended for a day at the request of the Lignorelli's handlers. It was widely interpreted as a sign of growing desperation on the part of the beleaguered young champion.

Strand found Zip alone in his room, bent over a small replica of a Radial Bowls green.

"Why aren't you in no-time?" asked Strand. He felt paternal toward Zip, as he had the day before. "You shouldn't have called time-out. It's making a bad impression."

"Doesn't matter," said the student, "I'm not gonna be the youngest champion much longer. I'll lose the match or end up older than Andreyeva. Or both."

"My trouble exactly," said Strand. "If I stayed in no-time long enough to solve my problem I'd be an old man."

Zip seemed confused. "Your problem? Huh?"

Strand smiled. "My problem is I spend too much time in the hotel trying to solve my problem, which is the hotel. Forget it. Here." He pulled out Zip's code update. "You shouldn't leave this lying around."

He explained how close he'd come to doing something disastrous with the code.

"No," said Zip, shaking his head. "We wouldn't be trapped going back together. I could've jumped to another room, and from there come back to my own time — "

"Uh-uh," said Strand. "No one can go from room to room in the hotel. It causes time paradoxes. Screw-ups, the future meeting the past."

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"Axelrod can," insisted Zip. "He left from my room. He had a call on his beeper. I saw him do it. He said it was him only."

"What was Axelrod doing in your room?"

Zip shrugged. "Told me he visited all new clients. He wanted to talk about Radial." The student snorted mirthfully. "I told him my problem, but he couldn't even comprehend, let alone help find the answer."

Strand felt suddenly self-conscious. Axelrod must have been drawn to the young man, much as Strand himself was. Strand pictured Axelrod showing off forbidden tricks with the time system, trying to impress the kid.

"Axelrod could have helped you, then," said Strand. "He could have gone up the line, found someone who knew the outcome of the match. Told you what your opponent's throws were."

And he could help me, Strand thought. He could have gone into the future and found out whether Angela and I stayed together. Whether it was worth all this, in the end.

"I don't think that would work," said Zip. "Probably the outcome is I lose. I think there isn't any right throw at this point."

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Strand. "Axelrod would never do it. He's very unimaginative about the whole no-time setup. I'd do it, but of course I don't know the codes." Strand recognized that he was vying jealously for Zip's affections.

"I remember the number," said Zip idly, as though it wasn't important.

"What?"

"Photographic memory. In grade school I was on TV for memorizing the entire Wichita telephone directory. I saw Axelrod type the code into the console."

"What are you saying?"

"The picture's still in my mind. Five-four-six-two-zero-zero. A prefix, for overriding the computer. Then he types the code he wants — "

Strand felt a sudden thirst to know the hotel, to possess it as fully as Axelrod did. He'd spent enough time there, after all. It was his turf, as much as Axelrod's.

"Let's go," he said.

"What?" said Zip.

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"Let's go together," said Strand, his excitement mounting. "We'll find out about that Radial move. Who knows what we'll find? Hell, we might even find a room with a view for you."

Zip raised an eyebrow, and didn't say anything.

"Come on," said Strand. More than anything, he wanted to guide the boy to victory. He wanted almost as badly to put no-time to some other use, now that Angela had stood him up; he wanted to renew his use of the hotel, make it mean more than just the affair.

Zip opened up the drawer of the desk and lifted out his time platform.

Strand had his in his briefcase. He'd been thinking of taking it to NoTime Inc. and turning it in.

The room looked the same as Strand's. But the bed was stripped, the blankets and sheets in a pile at the foot, and from the bathroom came the sound of running water, and someone humming a meandering tune. On the dresser was a smoldering hand-rolled cigarette, and the room was filled with the sweet stink of marijuana smoke.

Strand and Zip turned and looked at one another, but neither spoke.

An elderly black man came out of the bathroom, holding a sponge and a sprayer bottle. He would have been fairly short if he had been standing up straight; bent, as he was, like a question mark, he barely stood five feet tall. He opened his mouth in cartoonishly exaggerated surprise at seeing Strand and Zip in the room.

"You ain't supposed to come in like that, now. This is one of the in-between times. I ain't got the place made up."

"I'm sorry," blurted Strand, marveling. They'd discovered staff.

Suddenly the man's eyes narrowed. "You checkin' up on me?"

"Oh, no," said Strand.

"You could be lyin'," said the man. "Lots of people lyin'." He looked at Zip, who shook his head in wide-eyed fear.

"But we're not," protested Strand. "Listen, do you recognize this man? He's a famous Radial Bowls player. He's involved in a very important match — "

"I don't know nothin' about Radial," said the man suspiciously. He went to the dresser and stubbed out the smoldering joint.

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"It's on the front page of the newsclods," said Strand. "Everyone reads about it — "

"Oh yeah? Well I ain't seen any newsclod either."

"What," said Strand. "Do you and the other — the others who clean the rooms stay in the hotel all the time?"

"Ain't no others," grumbled the man.

"Are you saying you clean the whole place yourself? There couldn't possibly be time enough — "

"Time? There's plenty of time. And for every time there is, there's a between time, like right now. Me 'n' Yaller just clean it up when we ready." He indicated the aging scrubhound that had shambled out of the bathroom after licking the fixtures. "Ain't no hurry."

"Where do you live?" said Strand, confused.

"Oh, ho." For some reason this was amusing. "Way do I live? I live down the line a bit." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Same as all the rest, but I do like it back there. Feels clean and new. Ain't no one sleepin' in the bed before I sleep in it."

"Uh, Strand?" said Zip, strain evident in his voice.

"Yes." Strand tried not to appear flustered. He felt mildly affected by the marijuana fumes. "Well, I'm sorry we intruded. We'll just go and come back later. Some kind of slip-up, I suppose."

"Okay," said the janitor, shrugging. "I get it all clean up in a bit. Heh heh. So long."

Strand realized the man took him and Zip for a couple. "Here," said Zip. He'd scribbled a new number onto a sheet of the hotel's stationery.

It was the first time Strand had jumped from room to room within the hotel, and for a moment he thought Zip and the janitor had simultaneously vanished. But the bed was made. It was another identical room.

At that moment Zip appeared.

"Where are we?" said Strand. "How did you get this code?"

"It's easy for me to extrapolate the numbers," said Zip. "But I dunno where they wind up." He looked around. "At least no one's here."

Strand was impatient. How could they learn anything in an empty room? "Let's jump again — "

"No," said Zip, his voice high and squeaky. "I can't stay here anymore. This is getting too weird."

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"You don't want to see the rest of the hotel?"

"I never wanted to see the hotel. That's your bag. Besides, I have a Radial move to make." The student suddenly relaxed.

Strand felt bereft. He'd secretly wanted Zip's dilemma to be permanent, insoluble, like his own. To lead further into the hotel, not out of it. "You have a throw?"

"More: a strategy. It came to me while I was working with the codes, instead of thinking of the game. It happens like that."

"I understand," said Strand, hiding his disappointment. "Go and win the game."

"No," said Zip. "I'm going to draw."

Strand felt betrayed. "Shouldn't you try to win?" Wasn't that the point? But he knew he was naive about Radial.

Zip smiled. "I'm at the top of my game. Or maybe I'm fading; same thing." He shrugged. "Even if I won this match, I'd lose the next, y'know? I should just get on with my life."

Strand began to see. "So if you draw, you retire without losing?"

"In a sense. And," here Zip actually grinned, the first time Strand had seen him truly happy, "you helped me. Since you told me before that all the rooms are identical, right? Like the Radial slices, where we move from pasture to pasture, but they're all really the same. The way the balls lie now — it's like this: I can make a particular throw, a short easy roll, that she'll have to defend against. And her only possible roll will put me in the same jeopardy, so I'll be forced into one of two throws. One is ordinary, and after that I'd need a new strategy — and there just isn't one. But the other will force her into the same defense. And then it'll be a closed cycle, unless one of us aims badly on purpose: we'll have no choice but to chase each other around the green, through all the slices, forever. Movement, but no true change. So I won't win, but I'll have made my mark."

Strand understood. It was something entirely new for the sport. He could even share some satisfaction at the idea. "And they'll name the maneuver after you, I guess."

"Probably. So thanks, y'know? Maybe you'll be famous with Radial fans, too."

"Don't," said Strand. "You can't use my name."

Understanding lit the boy's face. "Sorry. I didn't wanna — I mean, I

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guess you got enough troubles, right?"

Strand relaxed.

"What will I do?" he said.

"Here." Zip went to the desk, and began scribbling out codes. "I can extrapolate codes from the pattern — "

"They can't all work," said Strand. "The hotel can't go on forever."

Zip shrugged. "Maybe it'll reject the useless codes." He continued writing. "Here's a few dozen. And here, if you want to go back, the return code, to my room." He circled it twice. "Where you left your platform."

Strand felt exhilarated and dumbfounded at once. He was free to roam the hotel. After years of jumping to a single room he was going to possess the territory, plumb its depths.

But he was to do it alone. Zip was punching in his return code at the wall console.

"Good luck," said the young man.

"Yes," said Strand, but by then he was alone. He felt a moment of sadness, but it passed. There wasn't any reason to sit in the hotel, moping.

He went to the wall console and punched in the topmost code on the list.

It was very much the same room again, with just one difference, a big one: two people sat on the edge of the bed, which was unmade, and neither of them wore any clothes. Most oddly, Strand knew who the two people were.

Angela and Axelrod.

"Richard!" blurted Angela. She didn't make any move to cover herself. Axelrod, on the other hand, grabbed his pants from beside the bed and leapt to his feet.

"I don't understand," said Strand numbly.

"You don't have to understand," said Axelrod. "You're in a lot of trouble. Where'd you get this code?" He sucked in his gut and fastened his trousers.

"Code, code," said Strand. "Uh, it was on that rolled-up paper you gave me in your office. For snorting the chamomile." Strand wanted to protect Zip, and this seemed an opportunity for a vicious lie. He wondered if it was vicious enough.

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"That's nonsense," snarled Axelrod. "You shouldn't trifle with me, Dick. You're under quarantine as of right now."

"Quarantine?"

"Time quarantine, Dick. What do you think you're achieving by blundering into the hotel like this?"

"Stop calling me Dick."

Axelrod hurriedly buttoned his shirt and tucked it into his pants. "Listen, old man," he said, stepping up to poke a finger at Strand's chest, "you don't seem to understand — "

Strand reared back, uncorking his hostility, and, from some unprecedented inner wellspring, delivered a championship-caliber punch to Axelrod's midsection. The younger man fell in a heap at Strand's feet. Strand noted with satisfaction Axelrod's bald spot, now quickly flushing pink. Old man.

"Oh, Jesus, Richard," said Angela.

"Motherfucker," gasped Axelrod from the floor.

Angela got up, still naked, and helped Axelrod to the bed. Strand watched, furious. It seemed to him that Angela ought to rush to him and plead out an explanation. But apparently she didn't agree.

"Okay," croaked Axelrod, his arms wrapped protectively around his middle. "Now listen. You can run if you like, deeper into the hotel — it doesn't matter. When you come out I'll catch you and hang you by the balls. Understand?"

"What if I never come out?" said Strand. "What if I just roam the hotel for a while? Kick everybody out, take it over."

Axelrod shook his head. "You'll come out. Trust me. You can get it over with fast, or play it out. Either way I'll get you."

"What are you talking about?"

"This is the future, Dicky-boy. You wanted to learn about the future — fine. But the future gets to learn about you, too. You fucked up, and you've got about, ah, about two weeks before we catch you."

"Two weeks?"

"Tell him, Angela."

Angela looked up from the bed guiltily. "I — I broke it off, Richard. Remember when I didn't come to the room?"

"Yesterday," said Strand firmly.

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Angela shook her head. "Two weeks ago. We've talked about it, only I guess you don't know yet. I'm sorry."

"You — you don't want to be with me anymore?" Strand ignored Axelrod's red-faced sneer.

Angela simply looked down at the floor, and now, only now, grew modest, reaching for a sheet to cover her breasts.

"What happened?" said Strand.

She looked up, her expression pleading. "Oh, Richard. I went to Daniel's office, about our problem." She glanced at Axelrod, who nodded, then went on. "Just as you did. You knew as well as I did that we needed a way to stop. A way out."

"And Daniel here offered you one."

She nodded silently.

"You're a married man, Dick," said Axelrod.

Strand sagged. The air had gone out of his universe. "How could you tell I didn't know about the breakup yet?"

"You turned in your platform two weeks ago," said Axelrod. "Right after the breakup. Renounced no-time. So this bouncing around, this intrusion — it had to be before. There's no way you can return to a time after you turn in your platform. We've got you pinned. We're later than you."

"So now I go back. To have Angela break it off. And then I wait around for the arrest."

Axelrod smiled. "It certainly looks that way."

"But no. That can't be right." Strand realized how little Axelrod knew about the situation. "You're only learning now. You don't know what you'll find when you jump back. Perhaps I'll have vanished. Or perhaps — " He kept himself from mentioning Lignorelli's platform. "Maybe by the time you come back I'll own NoTime, Inc. I'll have your job. You can't possibly know."

"Not exactly," said Axelrod. "Think it through. We've seen you around and about the last two weeks — Angela had to have someone to break up with, didn't she? You came back. So the only indeterminacy is what you did this afternoon before I pinned down your location, which I'll do as soon as we go back. In fact, I have a much better sense of how you spent the last two weeks than you do. Because for you they're the future — unknown."

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"It's true, Richard," said Angela.

"So go ahead, Dick. Do your worst." Axelrod was able to sit up straight now; he shrugged Angela away and pointed an accusing finger. "Maybe you're right, maybe you'll own NoTime. All I know is you didn't own shit this morning when I left. You weren't even man enough to come up to the offices and confront me about Angela. You'd been avoiding me."

Strand looked to Angela. She softened her eyes and nodded sadly. Was she communicating something, offering some hope? Or merely urging him to follow Axelrod's sneering orders?

"Go back, Dick," said Axelrod. "Don't make a mess of it."

Instead Strand punched in the next code from Zip's list, and jumped.

THE FIRST THING he noticed was the banner stretched out over the bed, a fading printout that read: STRAND GO HOME. Then he saw the poker game: five grizzled, middle-aged men sitting around a card table. The table was littered with cigarette butts and disarrayed piles of poker chips; behind it, the bed was strewn with delicatessen sandwiches. Strand felt something under his foot. He looked down. He was standing on a hat.

The men turned to face him. "Can we help you with something?" said one.

"We're all paid up for the room," said another.

Strand was struck dumb.

"Hey," said one of the others, in an exaggerated tone of wonderment, "you're that guy — you know, the one Danny Axelrod used to talk about — the one who went crazy and got lost in the hotel — "

"Where you been, man?" said another. "They gave up on you a long time ago."

"I'm not lost," said Strand. "I've been in the hotel less than an hour."

"You ought to get in touch with Axelrod," said the first man. "He doesn't even know you're still here."

Strand took his foot off the hat. "Tell Axelrod to go fuck himself," he said. "Tell him to stop playing games with me." He turned and punched a new number into the console.

He jumped to the sound of laughter at his back.

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The next room was empty. Apart from the banner again: STRAND GO HOME.

Strand saw now that Axelrod had jumped ahead and spoiled the hotel. There wasn't anywhere Axelrod hadn't already been. Strand had a sheet with twenty-some-odd codes, but Axelrod had access to the formula that generated codes to begin with.

And suddenly he understood something else: there wasn't any hotel. There was only a room, because that was all there needed to be. One room, extended endlessly through no-time. Suddenly the janitor's talk made sense. All the various liaisons and retreats were played out not side by side in some vast, drifting hotel, but one after another in the same little room, the same little desk and bed. With an elderly janitor and a scrubhound to swab it out after each visit.

It rendered Strand's desperation absurd. He'd been struggling to inhabit a single room.

He suddenly felt a terror of isolation there, alone, a thin shell of cheap wallboard between him and the no-time. It was the loneliest place there could possibly be.

He couldn't think of what to do.

Like Zip, he couldn't go back until he came up with a move. His opponent, like Zip's, sat and waited across from an empty chair. Only in Strand's case his opponent was ruin, abandonment, and death. And Strand lacked even the option to draw.

He punched another code into the console.

A woman was standing on the bed, taping the new GO HOME banner to the wall. One end draped over a pillow onto the floor.

Securing one corner with tape, she turned and smiled. "Good to see you again." She swayed slightly where she stood on the mattress, towering over Strand.

After a moment he recognized her. "You're the receptionist. You work for Axelrod."

She snorted mirthfully. "Axelrod thinks so. I mean, I do. But I was also waiting for you, and I'm doing that for myself. And for you."

Strand wondered how she could know he'd be there now, then blurted, "You got the list from Zip."

"I know Zip made you a list, and I know what codes he had to use as

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bases. It's the same thing." She shifted her weight and slid a drooping lock of hair from her forehead. "I needed to use a calculator, though. Couldn't do it in my head, the way he does."

Strand sagged in relief that the boy wasn't in league with Axelrod.

She spoke again. "Axelrod's a stooge. He has nothing to do with your real problem. He doesn't even know what it is."

"He told me he couldn't help me. And he wants to kill me."

"Danny couldn't kill a sick puppy. And he wouldn't need to help you even if he wanted. You're not aging in no-time, baby, not like you think."

He gaped.

"Think about it. How much time do you think you've lost?"

"Five years, I figure."

She laughed again. "You figure, or you feel? Look, you've been a client for less than ten years, and you didn't start using the hotel a whole lot until the last few weeks. I can give you your real count: it adds up to about six months."

Strand felt dizzy with bafflement and relief. "But my hair, the..."

"Listen. You're forty-five years old. Or maybe forty-five and a half. But that's it."

He sat on the edge of the bed, not caring if she looked down on him. "I feel so stupid."

"Don't. You're not the only one to worry about that. It's our third-ranking customer concern."

"I guess I knew I was losing Angela, and couldn't face it." He started to cry. "I was using her for so long, and she never asked me to leave Miriam, and — "

The receptionist sat down on the mattress suddenly and pressed herself against his side. "She didn't want you to leave Miriam. If she wanted a man all to herself she wouldn't ever have been with you." She snorted again. "And she sure wouldn't be with Danny Axelrod."

"I'll miss her, though."

She grabbed his arm tightly. Strand felt her breath chilling the tear streaks on his face. "Maybe, but you'll miss the rest of it a lot more. Did Angela herself need anywhere near the care you had to give to the planning, the slipping away?" His tears had dried and her breath was hot

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on his eyes. "Didn't you panic the first time you noticed your watch was hours fast? Did your wife notice it before you did, and ask you about it? Didn't it feel great after you lied your way out of it? And doesn't it feel great now, every time that you take the watch off first, that rush of competence and secrecy?" She breathed. "Some people just need that, and you got it with a woman instead of with, say, shoplifting like I used to." She stopped, her chest heaving against his sleeve.

Strand recalled the disappointment he felt over Miriam not noticing when he called her by the wrong name. "It did take a lot of effort to keep her from finding out."

She got a pinched look around her mouth and inhaled sharply. After a moment he realized that she'd succeeded at not laughing in his face.

"Oh," he said. "Oh."

"You're not the only one to think that, either." She smiled and released his arm. "So you don't really have a problem, not like you thought. You just need to find another secret to play chase-me with." She stood and pulled him to his feet, then kissed him quickly on the lips, pressing the length of her body up against him. She smelled lightly of sweat and hair lacquer.

"You'll go back now, won't you?" she said.

"I suppose so," said Strand. Then he felt wary. "So you've done your job — I'll return, and Axelrod will nab me."

She laughed. "You should be more trusting. You and Axelrod are exactly the same, thinking everything's cops and robbers."

She stepped away and looked at him. "If you want, you can phone me at NoTime. It's always me answering, or the service. Now get going; I need to finish this." She grabbed the loose end of the banner and stepped back up on the mattress.

He hesitated. Her warmth lingered on his chest and legs. "But if I call you now, won't it be too early?"

She faced him, laughing and swaying. "What do you mean by 'now'? What do you mean by 'early'?" She turned back to fussing with the banner.

Strand went to the console.

He started to punch in the return code, then paused, and substituted another code from the list.

A woman lay fully clothed atop the bed, turned on her side away from

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him. He felt a surprising surge of attraction toward her before recognizing her dress. It was Miriam.

His nerves iced over, just as when Axelrod had teased him with the murder accusation. How could she know I'd be here? he asked himself. He tensed as he waited for her to turn and confront him.

As the seconds passed, however, she remained still, showing no sign of turning. He saw that she didn't know anyone had entered the room; at the same time he saw her ribs heaving in noiseless sobs. On the bedspread beyond her sat several boxes of tissues. He knew the brand from her stockpile in the closet. He'd never thought to wonder why she bought in bulk.

Used tissues littered the floor. He felt a brief twinge of sympathy for the janitor, before reflecting that Miriam probably was one of the easiest clients to clean up after. She'd even brought her own towel to catch her tears on the pillow. The towel was in a color he hadn't seen around the house in months, that he'd assumed had been thrown out.

Then he noticed that it was nearly new.

He punched in the code for Zip's room, back in realtime. The eye of the world blinked and he was home.

The room was empty. Strand looked outside and saw Zip rushing away through the parking lot, off to make his throw.

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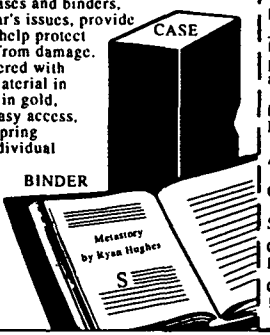

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Kathe Koja and Barry Malzberg have collaborated in recent years on dozens of stylish stories such as the following vision of how some people truly represent timeless aspects of humanity.

Orleans, Rheims, Friction: Fire

By Kathe Koja & Barry N. Malzberg

IN THE CELL: AND THE Dauphin close to her, wet breath, odor of teeth and robes the odor of death itself: is this what she wanted? *France*, yes, a kind of salvation she had called it but was it not extinction in another dress, reek of loam and excrescence to bury her along with the prayers? and now her death was the Dauphin, leaning against her, taking her small hand in his fist.

"It is not too late," that breath, those hands. "You must pray, you may find remission, you must ask by all the tokens of light for the grace of the Saviour Himself — "

The Saviour himself? and what does this clownish, duped and poisoned man, sunk into an indifference so profound it masks as faith know of the Saviour? She herself knows nothing but feels, ah, feels like sun on the skin the search and burn of those eyes, that dense and bloody forehead: at every step, every station betrayal seeps through the centuries, death is always death and screams are screams are the screams of disbelief and

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hatred as the true Saviour, stripped now of all radiance, shrieks from the vault of his emptiness *Why have you forsaken me*?

It is finished.

Yes, finished: finished for Jeanne too, all these hours in the dark have brought to her a bleak and blacker light and, preparing to present to the Dauphin that inextinguishable truth — that in giving herself to what she thought was France she has only rehearsed the last, disastrous discovery of Christ, that He had sacrificed Himself — oh God forgive but it is so, every instant, every dull dead beat of her dying heart knows it is so — given Himself to *nothing* and she as well: as here in this place, boxed nave become not only her cell but the shape of her heart she feels the Dauphin's hands upon her, the two of them grasping, small and rhythmic squeezing and through the establishing rhythm of that grasp the flutter and beat of his pulse, counterpoint upon her wrist and as she stares at him then, pale with blasphemy unuttered, she tumbles trapdoor to another understanding: beyond France, beyond the stations, beyond the bereaved and apostasaic Jesus Himself she sees the receding glow of what had come upon her in the fields, small terrible radiance which had seized her just as she fears in the next reflexive movement of his hands the Dauphin will seize her and take her station by station past the portals of her own damage, into the lie of light which had so enpooled her.

"Pray," says the Dauphin to Jeanne, "let us pray."

On the porch, caught not in prayer but some attitude of distant witness, ironic supplication: on the porch, tilting on the boards, feeling the liquor rise inside and Joan on this false veranda too high for the house, blurred, drizzling dark and she alone, all alone in T-shirt and silk skirt blowing white smoke at the rain. How could she have come here? what did she want? Silver light on the distant corner, street light and inside the party reeling on, stupid role-playing party, stupid game: *L' Histoire Concrète or who am I*? Perhaps the real question ought to be *Who was I*? but not here, not now because the game must be played: ask of others the questions, find out who you are and each guest assigned their little roles, a piece of paper slapped on her back as she walked in the door: *gotcha, gotcha now.* She had cheated, calmly cheated in front of everyone and not for the first time: JEANNE D'ARC plucked from behind to stare and then replace and the man in the black jacket, put on a collar and he could have been a priest,

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smirking and defrocked and asking archly "Don't you believe in fair play?"

Foreplay, did you say? smartass Joan in her school play might have asked but that was a long time ago, she did not say things like that now, said nothing at all because anyone could see he meant to pick her up, would more than likely make his move as soon as he knew for certain she was here alone but soon is as good as never because St. Joan of the Flowers, St. Joan of Chavez Ravine is not going to let him do it, is not in fact even listening to his pitch. What can he say — even given a collar — worth the time it takes to hear it? Despite the stupid jacket (and maybe he meant it to be stupid, maybe he's smarter than he looks, than she thinks) he could almost be attractive but not to her, not tonight, not ever; she is not going to fuck him or anybody, not up or down, not in or out: tonight she is definitely going home alone.

Nothing like an ashtray on the porch, fenced by walls from the house but part of the screen curls outward, faint mesh unglued from its nails, hanging in the drizzle and she bends to stuff the cigarette butt through that hole, send it falling into the wet black below, no sound, no hiss, no nothing but the dark and she is tired, tired and chilled from that rain and the dark, barely midnight but the thought of going home exhausts as surely as the thought of going back in. True name: why bother? Jeanne d'Arc had visions but this Joan of Chavez Ravine has only glimmerings, snapshots of embarrassment or anguish; this Joan has no terror of blasphemy because this Joan knows she has been fucked good and proper forever and long ago and so in defeat, in silence she lights another cigarette, procession of tapers leading her toward her indistinguishable night and she smokes and thinks of nothing, of everything: of the stretch and curl of time escaped, chronology sprinkled like stars through her memory, *l'histoire concrète* as concrete as an animal's gaze, a broken body, the drip and slip and slither of water down a warped and broken screen to pool like blood in her own empty abscess of memory and of loss.

The walls of the prison are always wet here, wet like the fields in stricken autumn, ribbons and droplets, prisoners' tears. *Witch's sweat*, says the old warder, a pious man unable to look her clearly in the eye: he wears his keys like a churchman wears a cross and "See?" he says, gesturing to the water, "see how it shines? It shines like blood, like your tears, like your stinking heart, witch, soon enough." And then into his

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prayers, all night she can hear him chanting, sometimes affixing broken pieces of the Mass to his misquotation and in the *pater noster* of his murmurs she can hear the ripe curses of Orleans. Her soul will burn as brightly within his piety as it will in the center of the Dauphin's disbelief, her soul will burn everywhere, all the flames and fires of France leaping from her windowed self: *witch*: soon enough.

And she says nothing, adding the warder's name to that long list which lives within her, the ones for whom she must pray: the indifferent, the evil, the liars, the silent, the ones who say this thing and mean another, the sheep and the sheep and the goats. A sheep's wool smells musty in moisture like this, rain like the rain she hears falling outside: death all around her from the skies and inward from the fire, a long, long time since she has walked thus, wet grass to hiss in motion like the gown of a fine lady, fine Joan, elegant Joan with a sound of silk and arch of bosom. Not my lady soldier in her boots and gauntlets, leading her weary horse, her weary men, how did it happen so? *Witch, witch*, the tower warder's laughter or perhaps it is she who makes the sound, uneven breath the rachet whisper of that laugh. Oh, go back, make the journey, think again: one day crouched small amidst hummocks and gray skies, counting her beads on her fingers, here Mary, here Michael, here the lower blessed saints and the muted grumble of the flock entrusted and the next the center of men who followed as simply, as singly as the sheep, her name their *ave*, her living flesh their standard: oh how had such a thing ever happened to her? *Voices*, they said, *she hears voices, she hears the voice of God Himself telling her what to do*: but that was wrong: the voices were one thing, instructions, directions, those she had been eager to follow, obey the light behind their light: but not God, never God, never that unmediated *ave*, the cry of God resounding but instead — and what had she done, what evil made manifest in her own clumsy work for good that she should be so persecuted — instead to her the stricken, the betrayed, the slowly evaporating Christ stumbling on the stones and whispering his frightened cries into her heart, cries then to pass through the filters of her own station and become instead a claim for France, *salve Franco, salve Gaul* and it was this, the whimpers of the betrayed Jesus, which had at last so fully told her exactly not what she must do but what she was, had become, had always been even there in the fields and the water no less than here in the water and the stone: there might as well have been no God

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at all, God hung somewhere behind the shroud of sky and his disciples as unquestioning as her own, her followers his, his Son her passport to this abandonment, the rest only brute forms of men surrounding her, carrying her to her own place, the place inside the fire.

And yet the rain, slow and steady on the walls to press upon her as did the pressure of prayer inside her head, that unvoiced cry, that voiced desire, blood in the bone, bone in the body, body a prison of bones made of terror and desire, the same desire which had nailed Christ to the cross of wood: to escape the void and the darkness, to do the work of the Lord.

"Hi again," near-silent hiss of the screen door, beside her now on the porch the unfrocked priest with a drink for her, a glass of pink champagne. "Oh, you should hear them," he says, handing her the glass which she accepts to set at once upon the porch, between her feet without comment or thanks. "They're going nuts in there, Martin Luther's arguing free will with Marilyn Monroe."

"Marilyn Monroe's not a real person," she says. "*Image concrète*, no?"

"Well," he says after a pause, "she's supposed to be real. Anyway there they are, the two of them, made for each other." His smile a supplicant's slyness, churchman's smile, warder's wink: "I think he's trying to score off her," he says. "Nail her to the wall."

"Better that than a cross."

"Well," and another pause. "It's just a game, right?" He smiles at her; her nipples are hard from the rain and the chill, she sees, feels him staring and "Stop looking at my tits," not bothering to turn away, to hide herself: why hide from him, what does he know? "Women hate that; *I* hate it. Stop it."

Stillness: the sound of the rain: does he like the acknowledgement that he has disturbed her, reached her, or is all of this simply beyond him? "They've got everyone almost figured out, concrete," he says calmly, a little subdued, looking out as does she at the darkness. "Martin Luther, Henry Ford, Marie Antoinette — "

"Marilyn Monroe."

"Marilyn Monroe, right," and grateful he nods, smiles, forgiven, "and Bette Davis and Edgar Allan Poe and Joe DiMaggio," gently tapping his own chest, "and Joan of Arc." Looking at her, making the little smile big. "I thought it was, was intriguing, what you did," touching the piece of

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paper, yellow note still stuck to her back, replaced. "That you looked, you know, at who you were."

More rain, tiny breeze to move her skirt, port-wine color, the color of blood. How late is it now? is it late enough? is it time to go home, can she leave now? Is it over? From his jacket, that ugly jacket the odor of cigarette smoke and perfume, his own odor, skin-smell ubiquitous as the flesh itself, fleshly priest, carnal priest among his lost congregation, warm meat to carry the oldest smell of all, that cold, bold retention amidst the stones of night but: no, that other Joan died a virgin, bride only to the fire and this Joan knows secrets of another kind.

"It's important," she says, looking straight at him, all eyes, one stare as reflexively he retreats, one step back and two and "It's important," again, insistent, "to know who you are. People forget. Who knows about Joan of Arc today? How many knew who she was at the time?" And what is it to you? she thinks, old knowledge, old fire, who knows where all the bodies are buried and burned? "We can only forget," she says, eyes wider now, "the movement of life is toward forgetfulness and the failure of memory. That's how it's meant to be. That's how it has to be," forward the march into the darkness, the light one dies reflecting consumed as well to darkness by that fire, it is all she knows, all she needs to know and he says something about this, false priest, priest of folly murmuring against the rising rain, mutter like a voice between her eyes; the offering hand, the pink champagne and this time she takes it, holds it, stem and circle in her hand, leaping streaming bubbles like angels dancing in the night, halo and firmament as he leans a little closer, just a little closer still, just close enough so she can hear the murmur of the echo of the memory of the heat, dark and concealed, meat on the bone to rise like sparks in the center of his own supplicating fire.

SO THEY FEED her but only a little: weeviled bread but not much, a watery drink they call with heavy laughter the Dauphin's toast. After a long wait during which she tries to think of nothing, no Golgotha, no Saviour, no blasphemy, no loss, they come to take her before the tribunal, men wrapped in deep cloaks against the ruinous cold, it is very cold yet the water on the walls continues to flow, beads to drip and run, witch's sweat.

You are a witch, they tell her.

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No.

You hear the voice of the Devil speaking to you. You hear many voices because the Devil speaks in all tongues. It is Satan who has driven you on.

No.

You are a tool and accompanist of Satan, you bear the wound of evil in your soul, you have incited to treason and death men whose lives by those deaths have been made evil, whose deaths first describe and then damn them eternally: their blood is on your hands.

No. You do not understand —

You have called to Satan in the fields and he has possessed you totally and you have in turn possessed those men.

No, no, no.

This continues. Scholars all their attempt is to distort and debate, twist her own words to make confusion, trap her, trip her, make her lie; she will not lie. Mary and Michael, the water on the walls, she could no more lie than could the sheep. You are going to burn, they tell her and that at least is true: that is what one does with a witch, a sorceress, no? You crucify a God, stone a saint, burn a witch. They call her a witch; very well then, she will burn.

The Dauphin at one time might have been expected to help her, might have been relied upon, watched for and awaited if he were more of a ruler and less of a child but inside he will always be a child. Some men are like this, has she not found this to be so? Tell them what is to be done and in their empty spaces, from their absence they will offer only assent: not so? Of course. Yes. Yes. There will be no aid from the Dauphin, no aid from the men in the cloaks who at any rate are bent on burning, no aid from the jailers or the other prisoners or the men who live or the men who died, died in battle, died in blood and fire, shrieks and prayers and at last in a kind of suppressed fury the questioning ends and she is allowed to leave, to be taken back to her cell where she is pushed to fall on hands and knees, where she keeps that posture to pray, head low, on all fours like an animal who does not raise its eyes to the master, who crawls across the stones, snaffling and breathing the water of its own sweat, who waits for the master's hand to bring punishment or pleasure, death or life, the water or the fire.

" — but without her deposit they wouldn't refund it," he says, "and I, I was going to try to make it up but I just couldn't, you know, at that time

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I couldn't really afford it." Touching her arm with the green lip of the champagne bottle, bare arm, wet glass; so cold, so bold, so old. "You want some of this?"

"No. I don't want any of it."

"But anyway," pouring for himself, elbow nudging hers, "she and I are friends again now, at least I think we are, I think it's good to stay friends. Don't you? To be friends, to try to — "

"Garbage," she says. "No. None of it."

"Not good to be friends?"

"No," she says, "there are no friends. Only the *concrete*, and phantoms all around it."

"Mmm," he says, "thoughtful," and lights another cigarette for her, uses the motion to put that arm around her, lightly, oh so lightly but she feels it like iron, iron warm from the body enslaved and she knows she should turn to him, stare at him, tell him to get his stupid arm away...but oh the cold, the rain and that cold, dark passage of time so heavy all around her and he keeps talking, warm body, flickering heat seen only through closed eyes and his moving lips, talking and telling her all sorts of things. Ex-girlfriends, ex-wife, all the women who are all still his friends and "Don't you think," he says, arm so firm and steady, so soft that murmur in the brain it could be her own voice conflated, "don't you think that making love, *really* making love is the best way to know a person? I mean really know them, know them all the way down; know what they're like, what they want, what they need? This is the way we touch, the way we communicate and I say when — "

"No," at once and brutal, "no, I don't. I don't believe in any of that. That's just another kind of scrap you're trying to put on my back, just another stupid note, that's all." Oh, what they need, what *they* need: fire and water, water running from the gutters, beading on the screen, is there enough fire in all the world to quench that water now? Her voice again but more quietly, as if her mouth has frozen, her lips so stiff and cold and "You want to know what I think? I think your making love is just a cheap euphemism for fucking and I don't think fucking solves anything or changes anything or makes anything happen *but* fucking and I think pretending anything else is just a lie, just a soft or hard lie depending on whether you're moving in or moving out because it's friction, it's all just friction." Shaking now, little hurt in her chest, big hurt from something

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else echoed and echoing and "It's all a lie," she says, "you're just a voice in my head. You're a voice in your *own* head, and none of it means anything at all to you, all you want is the heat, that's what I think. It's all a lie," she repeats pointlessly.

He says nothing. His hands are very warm.

She hears the voice as light in her head.

Nothing.

"You see," says the monsignor, his mouth still greasy from the *medianoche*, chicken grease, chicken bone, "you see, my daughter, Our Lord is very good to you. He has blessed you after all and beyond what you deserve: He has taken those voices from you, He has given you this silence in which to contemplate your repentance, He has freed you from the grip of the devil so that you might recant your evil and name your collaborators. Come, my daughter, make full and free confession," hands wiping quickly, fingers shiny on his robe, "come back to the arms of the Lord and it will be as if you had never left."

"I want a dress," she says, pulling with stiff fingers at her clothing, the same filthy breeches and white shirt gone gray worn when last she battled for God and St. Michael, for the ruined and ruinous Dauphin, for betraying France. "I want to wash myself, I want to be clean." Let me stand in the rain, she thinks. Let me stand in the rain as I stood in the fields with my sheep, hearing the voices for the first time: they were so sure, she was so sure then. Her head feels so light and hot but to the touch of her palms it is cool, almost cold, cold like the dead and "Let me," she says, "let me stand in that rain until I am clean, until I cannot smell my own body like some dead sheep lost from the sheepfold, until the heat is gone and the body shrinks and all the fire dies."

The monsignor says nothing more to her then or at least she does not hear it but they do bring women's clothing, not that shift and apron with which she is familiar but such as she has never seen. Oh how complicated and magnificent these garments, the garments of a proud woman and she has never worn anything like this in all her life and besides she will not strip there in front of the guards, she will not do this. "Go away," she says to the monsignor who has returned, "make them all go away. I want to be with my God and with myself."

"But my daughter," says the monsignor, "this should not be neces-

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sary. In the field they say you ate and slept and relieved yourself in full view of your men, you lived the life of a soldier yourself, is that not so? Why now is it different?"

How can she tell them? How can she talk of the arc of the empty field and the cries of the men, the standard flowing before her, how can she tell them when there is only silence in her head, her hot and aching brain; why should the voices leave her now, now when she is trying so hard like the sweet, damaged Christ lurching from stone to stone, begging for remission, for absolution, for meaning on the cross, trying so hard to be good, to do what is right: why *now*? and the monsignor's stare, the warders beyond and at last, crouched like a child with the clothing in her arms at last she breaks, weeping mouth open like an urchin in the streets, huge wet sobs so her body shakes, vagrant lump of flesh shuddering and trembling like a standard in the wind and one of the warders makes a sound, chuffing cough of disgust or dismay and "Let her be," he says, "let her be. She is only a child," and they all withdraw, the monsignor defeated, the warders perhaps in shame, how can she know? *She is only a child*: she is not yet eighteen, she has forgotten that, sometimes it seems as if she has lived forever.

They are all gone now, gone away and she alone, all alone, all alone in the black vast cathedral of the scream, of her empty heart, of her silent body burning now, burning from the inside out and after the weeping comes a state of voicelessness, comes then a silence so enormous it seems it will crush her to death where she lies against the stones, crush her to rags to lie beside those other rags.

Rags and distemper, brackish water and renunciation, *forgive, Father, it is finished*: those lady's clothes the assumption of which is beyond her, those lady's clothes that after some time a warder comes to take away, remove from beside her as if a cross too heavy for her frailty, her sickness, her narrowed sorrow to bear.

At least she thinks it is a warder but as it had been in the fields when first they spoke to her, it could have been God Himself.

"You're so cold," he says, he whispers; her T-shirt is damp, damp silk below, everything wet and cold and time brings nothing but the pressure of chronology to crush the living into the dead, the dead into the dead, Marilyn Monroe into Martin Luther, Jeanne into Joan into France into fire,

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everything smashed at last to silent fossils, small detritus, little chunks of bone and stone and rock over which that tricked and suffering Saviour can crawl, the defrocked priest can stroke, those places that no heat can ever conquer nor God resurrect: his hands are on her breasts but she can barely feel them, his clumsy mouth against her neck and "Let me," he says, "oh let me, let me — " like the rags on the pile, heat the cold and curtain, pile the wood around her like a temple or a home: *let it go*, her own voice and no other's inside her head, *let it burn, let it go.*

AS SHE BURNS the rains continue to fall. Breeches and stained shirt and oh, see her smiling; someone in the crowd is screaming *We have burned a saint!* but most of them just watch, too stunned by their own wretchedness yet laved by the burning, finding less than a moment's true diversion in her death. Away they will turn as soon as she is gone, they will resume like a rucksack their own unhappiness and it seems to her that the pain — which is worse, even, than the voices advised her, those voices at last returned like water in the desert, like manna in the mouth, honey in the horn of self, warm hands to hold hers in the terror and the cold, cold as the body on the stones of Gethsemane, the waters running out, the casting of lots, the dark and the noise of the soldiers: that pain is for all its magnitude a kindly figure as it strokes and strokes her body with iron claws, claws as clear as water, bright and hopeful claws to claim her and make her their own: just she and the shape of God itself, hammered to the stones and flying wood.

"What's your real name?" that closed-in voice, eyes closed as her own are open to watch: see: feel that rhythm against her thigh, rubbing and butting, heat against rock against cold and "What's your real name, your true name?" as he plucks at her nipples, as inside the house — shielded from them by walls, three silent walls and a silent door — something, a bottle, a body falls to shatter and somebody laughs, oh laughs so loudly as the rain becomes words in her mind, voices an endless ribbon like the ribbon of time turning back, helix, on itself, turning and twisting like the flesh to the fire and "What's your real name?" but oh, not now, not again, the fire next time but this time only the rubbing, the inflation, the

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murmur insidious of that voice and "That's me," she says into the sound of the water, her own voice a little cough, a croak, death's welcoming peep in the terror and the cold, cold as the body on the stones of Gethsemane, the waters running out, the casting of lots, the dark and the noise of the soldiers and "That's me, it was always me," as his fingers stroke her, as she pushes her body against his, seeking the friction that brings the motion that brings, might bring, must bring at last as the bowl of heaven inverts, as the cauldron of mind empties to fill again with the blood inexorable of the inescapable self: must bring at last the fire.

I have seen it all before, said the Dauphin, and held high the flag from the barren fields.

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School may be out for the summer, but that doesn't mean that the problems we have with our educational systems are going away. Far from it...

Jake West is a new writer living in Torrance, California. He and his partner are finishing up their first novel while also working on some screenplays.

Halls of Burning

By Jake West

Arrival:

THE UV DOME OVER THE parking lot is in sight.

Merely a block away, Roger Stenner sits in his car at a dead-stop, clenching and unclenching the steering wheel in much the same way that the ghostly fingers of his frustrations squeeze the pit of his stomach. He is very late for work again, so late that he is now caught by a seemingly endless river of students converging on Rodney King Memorial High School. For a teacher, getting caught in the last-minute rush would have guaranteed his own tardiness once upon a time, but now he has some slim hope: the metal-detectors and the epidermal drug-scanners slow them down these days. If he can make a simple left turn into the gated staff-only access street, he can still beat his First Period English students to the classroom.

Bernie waves to him from inside the transparent Security booth, obviously recognizing his aging '98 Quark. Stenner would be willing to bet that any parking lot frequented by high-school teachers harbors a much

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higher percentage of old, ex-gas-burners like his than, say, a comparable garage used by bank executives. Or School Board politicians. It still costs a lot less to install batteries than to buy a brand new electric.

There was a time when Bernie would have stepped out of the booth to halt the flow of kids for a second and give him a chance to drive through, but that time belongs to the past. Bernie is even less likely to unseal his locks than Roger is to try nosing the car forward through the crosswalk, even with a standard feature like bulletproof glass in his windows.

So, instead, he waits through the five-minute warning buzzer and the shrill echo of the final bell in the distance. Even then, it takes a few more minutes for the exodus to dry up, allowing Bernie to trigger the barricade. It rolls aside, and Roger Stenner finally makes his simple left turn, quickly, almost furtively, pulling into the side-street before some juvenile straggler can sneak through. He thinks, as he does so, that tomorrow he will be here early. That tomorrow will be different.

The problem is, he thinks that every day.

The Parking Lot:

Most people keep their mirrorshades on until they get inside the building. They do this as a safety precaution — after all, the old parking lot *is* exposed to the sun, despite the filter dome that the school district put over it — but it also gives them a kind of uniform anonymity as they arrive and file in through the security-locks. Most of the staff have noticed, consciously or unconsciously, and without really discussing it amongst themselves, that lately there is an advantage to maintaining a low profile. Specifically, since the recent change in administrative regimes. Since long-time Vice-Principal and Dean of Students Phillip Ligotti ascended to the Papal Throne behind the Principal's desk.

Today Stenner has lost that advantage since, reflective visor or not, he is the last teacher left in the parking lot. And newly ordained Principal Ligotti walks up behind him while he is fumbling with his briefcase in the back seat. Stenner flinches and hesitates: Ligotti is a person he would recognize without even turning around and whether he was wearing mirrorshades or not, because Ligotti has an artificial servo-motor implant in his right knee, and it makes a tiny but perceptible whirring sound when he walks, sort of like C-3PO in the old *Star Wars* movies. Stories vary

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wildly as to the origin of his injury, all the way from a Purple Heart in the Ukraine Action to a student riot during the South Central Secession to a really lurid one involving a bad divorce and a flight of stairs. Also, the implant causes him to throw his leg oddly when he walks, and other stories speculate that he doesn't get the gyro fixed because he likes the psychological effect of the limp — slow, deliberate, remorseless. Intimidating to staff and students alike.

All of this flashes through Stenner's mind in that split-second when he knows that he is caught and he decides on his strategy. Apology? Excuses? The hell with it. He goes for the bluff.

"Oh, hi, Phillip," he tosses off casually while finally retrieving the briefcase. He straightens up and turns to face Ligotti's perpetually flat, unreadable expression: not quite a scowl and never a smile. "Kind of smoggy for a walk, though. Campus quiet this morning?"

"You don't have time for small talk, Mister Stenner." Ligotti has a voice like a foghorn that smokes too much. "Second bell rang ten minutes ago."

"Sorry, sir. I didn't realize." *Mister* Stenner, huh? Okay. Message received.

Ligotti grunts noncommittally and starts to turn away. As he does so, Stenner looks past him and catches a glimpse of another person hurrying toward the building. From the back, it appears to be the slender shape of Dana Alexander, the new Social Studies teacher whom, so far, he has only seen from afar. In another moment, Principal Ligotti will see her, and, on impulse, Stenner frowns and points in the opposite direction.

"Damn! There goes another one, Mr. Ligotti."

"Huh? What — ?" Awkwardly, the older man swerves around, nearly losing his balance.

"Behind those cars. Right through there — see him?" Stenner plays it carefully now that he has Ligotti's attention, not too overdone.

"Another streaker?"

Stenner nods. "Well, on rollerblades, at least. And it looked like he had a spray can to me. How do these kids keep getting in here, anyway?"

He starts after the imaginary trespasser, but Ligotti waves him back. "Take your class, Mr. Stenner. I'll handle this."

"Okay, sir. Good luck." Stenner grins to himself as he hurries after

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the elusive Ms. Alexander, who has already cycled through the outer lock. It occurs to him that if he catches up, he can use the favor he just did for her as a great opening line.

Behind him, the whine of Principal Ligotti's knee increases in pitch as he lumbers away. Like a juggernaut starting to roll downhill into the enemy, accelerating as he goes.

The Access Corridor:

"I always feel like a rat in here." This is certainly not the first thing that Stenner means to say to her, and he even surprises himself when it slips out.

No less surprised, apparently, is Dana Alexander. "I beg your pardon?" she replies, her eyes wide and her eyebrows raised apprehensively. He can see her taking a mental step back from him.

"You know what I mean." Flustered, but hiding it, he tries to recover his poise. "They built these damn tunnels so narrow, there's hardly enough room for two people to walk side by side in here." He drops his voice to a sinister pitch. "Or maybe it's the way you can hear the muffled voices from the classrooms as you scurry along behind the walls..." He grins to let her know that he is joking.

"Well, I heard this old place was built clear back in the Sixties," she says.

"Yeah, about four decades and three name-changes ago." Meaning that, unlike the newer campuses, which are designed and built with the teacher-only access policies firmly in mind, King Memorial had to be converted over when the Isolation Principle went into effect. In this case, they had to move walls and shave a few feet from existing classrooms to create these claustrophobic passageways. "By the way, I'm Roger Stenner," he says, extending his hand.

"Dana Alexander." She juggles a couple of books to return his handshake as they rush along. Her grip is remarkably firm.

"You owe me a cup of coffee, Dana."

"Oh, really? Why?" He can't quite tell if she is annoyed or amused with him, although he is fairly certain that's a smile she is trying to suppress. Either way, he's getting a reaction.

"A word to the wise, since you're new here. Our beloved Principal

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Ligotti likes to take these little 'inspection tours' around the school, especially first thing in the morning. You know, on the lookout for really Big Stuff. Like drug deals and vandalism and teachers who are running late..."

"Oh, hell. Was he out there this morning?"

"Don't worry. I distracted him."

"My hero."

"Not really. He was just too busy chewing out *my* butt to notice you were there."

She laughs as they reach the T-junction where they will separate toward their respective classrooms. "Seriously, Roger — thanks. I didn't need a slap on the wrist my second week here." She flashes a smile at him over her shoulder as she walks away. "Nice to meet you."

"So, about that cup of coffee — " he calls after her.

"Roger! I'm *late*." She sounds exasperated.

"Hey, I'm just as late as you are. How about meeting me in the staff lounge after Seventh Period?"

She stops and gives him a quizzical look. "Are you *sure* about this?"

"My God, it's not a marriage proposal."

"Okay, then." She is still giving him that enigmatic appraisal, as if suddenly recognizing him as a celebrity she cannot quite place. "After school." And she takes off.

Down the opposite end of the corridor, Stenner reaches the spiral metal staircase that leads to his second-floor classroom. Halfway up the rungs, he pauses to give her a last appreciative glance, and a voice directly below him says: "I've seen *that* look before. Is it true love or just lust?"

"What are *you*, McNeill? Hall monitor?" He looks down at the Math teacher's balding and sunburned scalp. It annoys Stenner that a person who has his prep time during First Period — and thus, who could be late every morning — is the only teacher in the whole school who is chronically early.

"Sorry." McNeill holds up his hands as he walks away. "You just didn't seem like the type."

Before he has a chance to ask what that strange comment means (the type for what?), Stenner reaches the top of the stairs.

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The Classroom:

These days, teachers make theatrical entrances: stepping through the wall from hidden passages, rising up through the floor from trapdoors behind desks. Stenner has sometimes thought of appearing in a puff of smoke as he ascends into his classroom, but this current generation, raised on virtual reality and spazzjazz, probably wouldn't even understand the reference. Besides, the smoke would fill up the tiny plastic cubicle that contains his workspace — desk and computer terminal — with a choking cloud that would keep him from seeing their reactions.

Not that he can see them much better this morning: some smartass has sprayed his booth on the studentside with ugly and incoherent decorations, leaving a few gaps here and there for him to see through. Tagging, they used to call it. Now it's called scars, and this example seems to consist mostly of gang signs and other territorial posturing — the human equivalent of dogs pissing on trees to mark their territories, in his opinion — with a few choice obscenities written backwards for his benefit so that he can read them from inside the booth and thus enjoy their sentiments.

"Very funny," he says through his speakers to the rising wave of hysteria in the room. Stenner can feel his lips compressing into a thin, angry line, but he carefully wipes all expression off his face as he drops his mirrorshades and briefcase on the desk and assesses the damage. Actually, he is surprised that the paint hasn't already sloughed off the nearly-frictionless surface that was developed to cope with this decades-old problem. Thinking that maybe it is still fresh, he touches the keyboard command that will fire an electrostatic pulse through the bulletproof polymer and speed up the process of repelling the graffiti.

And nothing happens.

"It's monobond, you jerk!" a nasal voice shouts anonymously from the back, and the laughter explodes again, this time with an especially nasty undertone. Great. Stenner remembers reading somewhere about this new stuff, a molecule-thin paint guaranteed to cover in a single coat, that works by literally *becoming* the surface to which it is applied. Neither cheap nor easily available, it certainly wasn't bought at the local hardware store. Looks like somebody has jacked a construction site recently.

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Why is it that every improvement in life just seems to give the punks a new weapon? A sudden wave of disgust for a world where elaborate countermeasures are both necessary and so increasingly pointless threatens to sweep him away. Instead of surrendering to it, however, he sits down at his terminal, enters his suspicions in Security's database and puts a red flag on it. Then he E-mails Maintenance regarding the ruined cubicle, though he will never lay eyes on a work crew during school hours. Only the Security chops would come in with students present, so he resigns himself to a day with limited visibility. In fact, he will be lucky if what is popularly known among teachers as "the shark cage" is replaced by tomorrow.

"Very clever, whoever's responsible. Very articulate, too. By the way, there's no 'u' in mother." Sarcasm is lost on most of this audience, but it makes him feel better anyway. "Now, I want all of you to access page 134 in the textbook and do the interactive with me at the end, when you've finished reading the chapter — All right, that's ENOUGH!" Suddenly, he thunders at them by cranking up the volume to a technically illegal level, cutting through all the noise and chaos. Instantly, the room quiets down into a sort of shocked, grudging silence.

He glares at them through the broken arms of a crudely drawn swastika. "Everybody in their seats — *now*," he says at a more normal level, and most of them comply. "This means you, too, Mister Gorman."

"Hey, I still got business to conduct here. Do you mind?"

"Tell it to the chops, Mister Gorman. Or sit down. Your choice." Stenner makes himself sound bored, but his hand hovers over the call-button, and the kid knows it. Finally, he struts back to his terminal and slouches defiantly in his seat, smirking and making comments under his breath that cause a ripple of smirks around him.

His point made, Stenner ignores them, and, realizing that the show's over, the group regains some resemblance to an English class, though, as he slides into the rhythm of moving electronically from terminal to terminal, remotely checking each student's work, correcting and commenting in real-time as he goes, Stenner feels an ongoing residue of emotions in the room, compounded of anger and unfocused hatred from some of them, frustration and boredom from others, contempt or amusement and especially much embarrassment over what happened. And fear.

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It is an intoxicating mix, almost a palpable odor to him. It fades as the period draws to a close but is reflected in the quality of the work, all the way from the kids who did nothing to the sincere efforts, like LaWanda Siddons at Terminal 17, who made some genuinely insightful observations on Stephen Crane's use of simile and metaphor. Stenner types a few, quick lines of feedback to her, wishing that he had time to give her more.

Wishing that he could talk to her face-to-face. Stenner only had one year of teaching at the beginning of his career before Isolation. Today he misses the freedom of that year more acutely than ever: the freedom to lecture without pacing back and forth behind a barricade, to walk among his students and ignite a rousing discussion, or to be close enough to actually *see* that lightning bolt of understanding in their eyes when they suddenly grasp an elusive concept. When they've been struggling to understand something, and suddenly they Get It.

But that won't happen. The mechanics of the job are much different now, and the rewards are proportionately less. So the period ends, and he goes on with his day, which turns out to be a fairly commonplace day otherwise. Oh, during Third Period, they hear shots fired down the hall, and Security slaps a computer-lock on their door, but nothing significant comes of it. Just to be safe, Stenner keeps a closer eye than usual on the system-wide updates, but no deaths are reported on campus, and Intelligence assigns a low probability to the Violence Index.

In short, other than the graffiti in his classroom, a quiet day.

The Incident:

Until the graffiti saves his life.

He never finds out what causes the battle. Perhaps it is related to those earlier gunshots, or possibly somebody is offended by the gang-signs that prevent his clear view of the room. Maybe he would have been able to see it coming with better visibility. Instead, all he knows is that open warfare erupts between two students during Fourth Period, the kind that often results in gunplay, accompanied by the usual screaming, ducking and panicked stampede — with an important difference. One of the combatants is armed with something much worse than a 9mm popper, something that proves Stenner's earlier suspicions about stolen construction gear.

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The kid has a laser spot-welder, modified for the street. It is a hand-held job, pumped to deliver its entire charge in a single pulse, burning out the emitter in the process.

In other words, it only fires once, but that one shot can be lethal as hell.

If it connects, that is. The intended target flings himself over a desk, and the shot misses him completely. It scores a direct hit on the front panel of Stenner's security-booth, however, which is directly in the line of fire.

Under other circumstances, Stenner would have been dead instantly. Instead, the monobond paint splashed across the plastic in front of him stops the beam for a heartbeat. He looks up in time to see a hot-spot flash incandescent in the paint a split-second before it burns through at chest level. What he does next has nothing to do with conscious reasoning, or even an awareness of what the flash means. It is an action born of pure instinct, and it is exactly the right thing to do to save his own life.

He grabs his mirrorshades off the desk and holds them up. Before they melt, their reflective surface scatters the laser back into the room, dazzling the students left in the front row.

The shooter gets the worst of it, though. Much of the coherent light bounces straight back at him, badly scorching his face. His hair bursts into flame, and he stumbles out the door, blinded and shrieking. He is already gone by the time the fire-control system kicks in, dousing everyone else and shorting out most of the terminals.

Excluding Stenner's there in the cage. The general announcement it displays a few minutes later — that his classes are cancelled for the rest of the day — is overridden on his screen by an urgent personal message from Administration.

Stenner gets an old, funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. It has been many years since he was last summoned to:

The Principal's Office:

"If the lawsuits don't ruin us, the publicity will."

The damage control party in Ligotti's office surrounds him like a tribunal of the Inquisition. Except that the clerics have been replaced by law-clerks and dogma by spin-doctors. Instead of heresy, they are looking

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for liability these days. And violations of political correctness, which is just a modern kind of dogma.

For a couple of hours, now, he has answered all their questions: Who started — ? When did you — ? What if you had — ? While throughout the interrogation — because that is exactly what it is — Principal Ligotti sits tilted back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Listening to the frenzied debate with his feet up on the desk, legs crossed. Slowly, he wiggles his right foot back and forth, causing the artificial knee to make a scratchy, insect sound, rhythmic as a cricket. This twitch is the only barometer of the principal's true agitation.

Stenner sees this as a bad sign. Generally speaking, the quieter Phillip Ligotti becomes, the worse it is.

"I was only defending myself," Stenner says mechanically for the umpteenth time. "My God, it isn't like I planned to hurt the kid," he adds this time around, but it is only a half-hearted protest. He is realizing that facts will have nothing to do with the outcome of this.

"You don't understand our exposure," the District rep tells him. He's probably right. The political climate has been much different since the Crip Party won their majority in the State Legislature.

"You're suspended, pending further investigation," Ligotti says abruptly, dropping his chair legs back to the wooden floor with a *thunk!* as final as a judge's gavel. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stenner, but I don't see that we have any choice."

Stenner doesn't argue. Seventh Period has long since come and gone, and he excuses himself more with relief than with righteous indignation. Even though he should be worrying about how he is going to pay the rent or pay for his own attorney, the only thing he can worry about right now is whether or not Dana Alexander waited for him.

The Teacher's Lounge:

Apparently not.

The only person in the lounge is a man that he doesn't recognize: blond guy, slender, narrow features. Who can keep up with the turnover in this place?

Then the guy says: "Roger?"

"That's right." Stenner looks at him hard, wondering how he knows

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his name, wondering if he should recognize him, and then the light dawns. "Did Dana Alexander leave a message for me? I guess she couldn't stay, huh?"

The blond gives him a quizzical look that is somehow oddly familiar, as if he has seen it before, just recently. Just today, in fact. On another face.

"Oh, shit, Roger. You didn't *know*."

Stenner feels the blood drain from his own face. "*Dana*? But — but — you're a *Social Studies teacher!*" He blurts out the first stupid thing that enters his mind.

"Alternative Lifestyles Specialist, actually." The other man smiles sadly. "I thought this was too good to be true."

Stenner grins back sheepishly. "These things happen, I guess."

"Are you disappointed?"

"Oh, I'm okay." Stenner takes a step back, frantically searching for a graceful exit line from an embarrassing situation. "Trust me. After the day I've already had, things couldn't possibly get any worse."

Departure:

The police are waiting for him in the parking lot.

Late afternoon sun glints off the light-bar of the cruiser parked next to his old Quark. A few staff people stare as they go past, then hurry a little faster to their own cars.

One of the two officers — the older one — asks him his name and informs him that he is under arrest. "For Reckless Endangerment of a Minor and Irresponsible Response to Violence," he says and quotes the penal codes, though Stenner senses his reluctance with what he is doing.

"Officer, you know this is wrong." Stenner is surprised at how calm his voice sounds. "The kid took a shot at *me*."

The cop takes his arm and walks him a few steps away from the car. "Look, I'm sorry, Mr. Stenner, but the boy's parents filed charges. We don't have any choice."

"Christ, *I'm* the one who should be filing charges." But it goes without saying that he can't. They both know that Stenner signed the same waiver that every other public school teacher does when they take the job.

"All I can tell you, sir, is that it will look better for you if you

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cooperate. Personally, I would advise you to think about *all* the implications." The cop jerks a thumb meaningfully at the audio pin-recorder attached to his collar: *That's all I can say on the record, pal.* So what is he really trying to tell him?

Stenner follows the officer's gaze down to the motorized barricade at the end of the access street, and it all becomes clear to him.

Suddenly, he is very aware of what might be waiting for him on the other side of that barrier — of how many friends the gang-banger in his class might have, and what they might be planning in retaliation. And where. And how leaving here in the company of armed policemen is, quite possibly, the only way he might leave here alive.

"I see what you mean," he says and humbly, almost eagerly, extends his arms for the handcuffs.

Unlike his students, Roger Stenner learns his lessons.

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The Green Man

By Rand B. Lee

WHEN JEFFREY ANDREW Russell needed to escape his mother, he hid in the old black Buick on the edge of the far pasture, where the woods began. The Buick had small dark windows and doors as heavy as coffin lids. Long ago, the family had ridden around in it, but before Jeffrey was seven someone had left it to sag into the soft Connecticut green. The Buick's name was Vi, because its upholstery was gray-violet. His family named all their cars, the way some people name their boats, or their children. Except when he needed somewhere to hide, he avoided the Buick, in part because dreaded spiders had come to live in the glove compartment, but also because he had always thought of Vi as a sort of person and now she was dead, which made him feel sad and desirous of showing respect.

On the summer day the Green Man appeared to him for the first time, it was very hot in the car. In deference to the spiders, he crouched in the rotting back seat, making himself small, breathing shallowly and softly,

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listening for the sound of his father's car horn in the driveway, which would signal that it was safe to go back into the house. In a corner of the windshield, a spindly-legged yellow jacket mumbled to itself. Outside, the cicadas practiced their scales. The path through the pasture, which was overgrown with black raspberry and thistle, remained empty, but this was not to be trusted. He fought to stay awake and alert.

The heat was palpable. He began to nod and drowse, jerking upright at imagined sounds of movement, then drowsing and nodding again. Having drowsed once too often, he woke in a panic from a deep sizzling sleep to find Vi darkened with the slant of late day. Cautiously he opened the door, got out, and stood up directly under the gaze of a tall, broad-shouldered figure standing not ten feet away in the forest fringe.

His first panicked thought was, *Mom!*, but almost instantly he realized that it was not his mother: it was a very dirty, very hairy bearded man. His hair was black, and it grew all over him: long and matted on his head, a tangle of beard hanging below the big nipples of his broad furry chest, his penis and testicles dangling pale between the dark-pelted columns of his legs. Late light spilling through the birches cast a green glow over his shoulders and belly. His eyes were holes of shadow. Jeffrey stared, not daring to twitch, but in the end he had to, and the instant he did, the green man was gone, without a rustle of brush.

Jeffrey blinked, moved forward into the forest fringe, and listened, the way he listened at the door of his bedroom for his mother's footstep on the landing. "Hello?" he said, in what his mother would have called a stage whisper. "I know you're there." He listened some more. The woods were like lungs breathing in and out. Jeffrey had always steered clear of the woods. He was afraid of the snakes which sunned themselves on the summer trails, and he had heard somewhere that there were old bear traps under the loam that could take your foot off at the ankle before you knew what was happening. He was still standing there, undecided, when he heard a car toot twice across the meadow.

He returned to the house with careful haste by the front door facing the street, which only he and the Jehovah's Witnesses ever used. The mountain laurel growing to one side was out of flower by now, its tiny white sticky maroon-banded grails of blossom withered and fallen to the sterile acid loam. From the foyer, he ascended the staircase which led to

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the landing separating his bedroom from his parents'. He could hear the clatter of dishes from the kitchen which meant that his mother was preparing dinner. The clatter did not sound particularly quick or harsh; he relaxed a bit. This meant she was not too angry at him for running away from her. The television gabbled from the living room: the war in Vietnam, as usual; Jeffrey's father, catching a few minutes of the early news before dinner.

Jeffrey went into his bedroom with the Star Trek models suspended by wires from the ceiling and lay on the blue corduroy cover of his bed. He thought of the green man and felt excited in a way he could not name. The man had felt wild to him, somehow, much wilder than the raccoons who thudded every night from the pine tree onto the roof. Jeffrey had seen a wild deer once. It had jumped into his father's headlights when they were coming home from the movies in New Milford. His father had cursed and slammed on the brakes. The deer had just stood there, and then it had vanished, with no more sound than a goldfish makes in the goldfish bowl. But the green man had seemed wilder even than this.

When his father called him to come down for dinner, he descended to the kitchen by the second staircase on the other end of the house. His mother was putting the finishing touches to a platter of cold roast beef and sliced tomatoes, her broad back turned to him. His father was not there. He felt a moment of panic. She had thick hair the color of field-mouse fur. She always claimed she had eyes in the back of her head, and once again she demonstrated the reasonableness of this: the moment he entered the room she said in a quick rich quiet voice, "Honey, Mama was just funning; she would never hurt you, you know that." She did not pause in her work and she did not turn to look at him. He took his seat at the kitchen table, thinking of the green man's invisible eyes.

At dinner under the kitchen fan, Jeffrey's father announced his intention to go on a lecture tour. "Scott thinks it's the ideal way to promote the new book," he said. Scott was their agent in New York. Jeffrey's father wore a gray beard nothing like the green man's beard, and he was so fat he had no waist, only a belt across the middle of his bulge, like Humpty-Dumpty. He mopped his brow with his napkin every few minutes.

"That's a marvelous idea," said Jeffrey's mother. Her yellow shift

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clung to her in the heat, showing the outline of her big breasts and her slender waist. She put a slice of cold roast beef on Jeffrey's plate, next to his salad. "There you are, love," she said, smiling at him, as though nothing whatever had happened.

"Thank you," Jeffrey said.

"Thank you *whom*?" growled his mother, doing her Captain Hook face.

"Thank you, *Mom*."

"That's better. Give Mama a kiss," she said. She pursed her lips. He screwed up his face and sacrificed it to her. She took his chin in her hand and mashed her mouth against his. She smelled like tobacco, cows, and wine. She released him with a satisfied smack of her lips. "Umm, gum," she said. Dropping his gaze to his plate, he noted with alarm the Italian salad dressing running into his meat. "When would you be leaving?" his mother said to his father.

"Around January first," said Jeffrey's father, forking roast beef.

"Can I come with you?" Jeffrey asked.

"*May* I come with you," said his mother.

"May I come with you?" Jeffrey asked.

His father scowled. "No, son. You've got school. This meat is a little well done, Rae."

"I'm *so* sorry," Jeffrey's mother replied smoothly. She had been about to transfer a slice of beef from the platter to her plate. Inspecting it, she lifted it into the air and held it out to her husband instead. "Here, Simon. This is as rare as can be."

Jeffrey's father proffered his plate. "What are *you* going to have?"

"Why, there's enough here to feed the Russian army," said Jeffrey's mother. She took another piece of meat from the serving platter.

"For God's sake, Rae, that's an end piece. There's no red in it at all."

"It's perfectly delicious," said Jeffrey's mother with finality. She cut a piece of dry brown meat, chewed it, then took a sip from her third glass of white Gallo. Jeffrey watched his father watch her wrap her big fingers around the glass, raise it, tilt it, suck up the pale liquid into her full, sensual mouth.

Jeffrey's mother had been a radio actress in Hollywood in the Thirties, known for her dramatic voice. She had met Jeffrey's father on the set of a

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show where he was one of the head writers. Hanging in the upstairs dressing room was a picture of her as she had looked then, a black-and-white studio still. In the photograph, her hair was shoulder-length and gently waved. Her chin rested on white-gloved hands. Around her neck twined a choker of big round ceramic beads. She gazed straight out at the photographer, fearless and subtly challenging. Jeffrey thought it was the most beautiful picture he had ever seen.

They ate in silence for a while. Then his mother stood up and poured herself another glass of wine from the counter. Jeffrey drank some milk. His father said to him, "Don't fill your belly up with milk. You haven't touched your salad." Jeffrey searched his salad for something without much dressing on it. He settled on three cherry tomatoes. He ate them slowly, one at a time, clamping down on them hard with his teeth so they exploded into wet sweetness, like little bombs. Sitting again, his mother took a few more bites of meat, then put her fork and knife in "finished" position. She lit a Camel cigarette, blowing smoke up toward the ceiling. "Is that all you're going to eat?" Jeffrey's father asked her.

She looked over her men. Her eyes twinkled. "I *am* so *full* I *could* not *pull* a-*no*-ther *blade* of *grass*, baa, baa," she replied.

EVERY DAY after that Jeffrey looked for the green man. Sometimes he thought he saw him out of the corners of his eyes, but when he turned, there was never anything there. When his father took him shopping in New Milford, the next big town over, Jeffrey scanned the clusters of hippies on the Green. His father said, "If they'd bathe occasionally people would take them more seriously." None of them looked like the green man. As trees flashed by on their homeward drive, groves of slim trunks misted green, Jeffrey searched their dappled depths for signs of dark thigh and hairy shoulder, but they were just trees.

One evening, remembering the stories his mother had told him about leaving food for the Little People, Jeffrey spirited a chicken leg and a cup of milk out of the fridge and left them on the hood of the Buick. The next morning, the chicken leg was gone and the cup was overturned in the grass. Encouraged, he tried the experiment again, but abandoned it after he stole out one night with a flashlight and surprised a raccoon mother and

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her babies consuming the offerings. He stayed on the alert, and more than once spent the day in the far pasture, hoping that the green man would appear, but he did not.

One night Jeffrey's parents had a big fight. It was a Friday. They went out to dinner and came home after Jeffrey was in bed. Jeffrey was glad when they went out to dinner, though he could not have explained why; it made him feel safe, the way it made him feel safe on the rare occasions when he walked into the kitchen and found them standing by the sink kissing. Lying in bed, he thought about the green man while the old house creaked around him in the dark. The house had been built in 1792. There was a huge stone fireplace downstairs with a Dutch oven built into it, and there was an attic full of cobwebs and old steamer trunks. The driveway gravel had garnets in it; you could pick them up like rubies and hold them to the light. The first spring after his parents had moved to the house, only white flowers had come up in the front gardens. His mother had pulled them all out because, she said, they reminded her of funerals. She had replaced them with color: slashing red tulips, like her lipstick; foaming beds of yellow, purple, blue, wine, rose, and brown irises; geysers of pink phlox which she complained always ran to magenta after a few years.

When he was very little she had given him a little bed of his own to plant, out near the well-house off the driveway. He had liked pansies, with their foolish gold and black faces; bachelor's buttons, particularly the dark reddish-purple kind; and four o'clocks, which opened only in the late afternoon and always amazed him because they had flowers of different colors on the same bush. His mother said to him, "You have a green thumb." She always took care of the flowers but gave him the credit. When he got older, he helped her weed among the corn and tomatoes. She told him wonderful stories, about Wol the owl and Eeyore the donkey and a green garter snake that had visited her one summer in the garden they had had before they had moved to this place, when he was still in the baby carriage. "He came right up and sat in my lap," she told him. "He would go away when the sun went down and be back the next day." After a while he got tired of gardening, and she eventually stopped asking him to help her.

He fell asleep and was awakened by the car crunching on the driveway. Doors opened and slammed shut. He heard raised voices, his mother's loud and contemptuous, his father's loud and defensive. A long

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while passed before the voices stopped, then another long while during which he heard his father's heavy ascension of the stairs, his bathroom garglings and flushings, and finally silence. He lay in the dark, alert. His chest and stomach felt heavy.

He thought, quite suddenly, of a day when he was four and his parents had taken him down to the lake with some of their grown-up city friends. There were water-lilies in the lake, which was very shallow, and perch, and a dam at one end which the water slid over in slow glassy sheets every spring thaw. That day the dam had been dry. The visitors had stood on the concrete in their New York clothes, chatting and puffing on cigarettes, admiring the scenery. Forgotten, Jeffrey had squatted at the edge of the dam and looked out over the water. He had been able to see his reflection in the surface of the lake, darkened and ripply; then, as his eyes had adjusted to the play of light and shadow on the water, he had found he could look through his reflection and see the bottom of the lakebed.

Up on the dam the air was full of chattering voices and an odd tension. Down in the water it was still and calm, lake-weed hanging immobile, each pebble distinct. A yearning had swept over him, a yearning to be part of that tranquility, to sink down deep into it; he had found himself falling forward toward his reflection. His father had caught him and pulled him back with an oath of concern. They had made much of his near-mishap, which had pleased him. But now, lying in the dark, he remembered the stillness at the bottom of the lake and longed for it again.

He had just begun to doze off for a second time when he heard his bedroom door opening. Yellow hallway light jabbed his eyes. He smelled his mother's cigarette and her Blue Grass cologne. He closed his eyes and lay still, his heart pounding. The cigarette and cologne smells increased. He felt her breathing above the bed. "Baby," she said. She touched his hair. He thought of the lake and sank down, down.

The next morning, his parents would only talk to one another in monosyllables, and his father took the car into New Milford to have breakfast there. Jeffrey sat at the big kitchen table with his mother. Her cigarette burned in an ashtray. She looked tired, and drank several cups of fragrant black coffee while he ate the buttered waffles she had made him. "Are they good, baby?" she asked him. He nodded. After a silence, she

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took a drag on her Camel and added, "Your father's being a bastard." When he glanced up at her face, she blew smoke, blinked rapidly and smiled. "Well, enough of *that* nonsense." She patted his small hand with her big ugly one. "You're my precious baby. Finish your breakfast; Mama's got chores to do."

She drained her coffee, got up from the table, and started sweeping the floor. By the time he had eaten the last of his waffle and deposited his dishes in the sink, she was on her hands and knees scrubbing the linoleum with a brush. He went upstairs to his room, got out the Science Officer tunic his mother had made for him and the Spock ears his father had bought for him, put them on, grabbed a phaser, and went downstairs again. His mother was still scrubbing the kitchen floor. Her cigarette was in her mouth. He left the house by the mountain laurel door and made for the vegetable garden.

The garden was south of the far pasture where he had hidden in the Buick and seen the green man for the first time. His mother had had one of the young neighbor farmers till up the ground for her, and she had planted tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, squash, beans, sweet peppers, cucumbers for pickles, dill for pickles (she made them herself in a big tub in a nook off the kitchen next to the dishwasher), glads, which he thought really looked glad with their bright colors, and sweet corn. He crawled through the sweet corn, trying to circle around the party of Klingons who had devastated the Federation outpost. The soft manured earth gave under his knees and hands, rich as chocolate cake. Though the day was already sweltering, the ground was still wet under the corn.

The Klingons were proving difficult to evade. They had spread out in a wide scan of the area, searching for him. Jeffrey changed direction and headed at top speed toward the old asparagus patch, which marked the eastern edge of the tilled ground. Beyond it lay meadow, then a near arm of the same woods which bordered the far pasture a quarter mile away. Jeffrey reasoned that if he could make it to the meadow, he would be out of the Klingons' phaser range, and the *Enterprise* could beam him up before the Klingons knew what was happening. In the heat, his Spock ears felt heavy. The asparagus, long gone to plume, waved before him. He broke from the garden and made a dash for the cover of a clump of black raspberry.

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The green man was standing in the meadow halfway between the forest edge and Jeffrey's raspberry clump. He looked exactly as Jeffrey remembered him: naked as night, hairy, powerful. He raised his left arm, muscle-bunched, in greeting, palm held flat and upright. For a moment Jeffrey thought he was going to open the two middle fingers, the way Mr. Spock did. Then the green man dropped his arm and began moving slowly toward the woods. At the fringe, he stopped and looked over his hairy shoulder at Jeffrey, waiting, *smiling* a white smile like the Pepsodent man, though Jeffrey knew the green man probably did not brush regularly after every meal. The smile hit Jeffrey like a baseball in the face, but in a good way. It was a smile for him alone, like Mr. Halloran's smile at school when he got an "E" on his spelling test. But before he could move or say something, the green man had turned again and melted into the trees.

This time Jeffrey ran right up to the woods and a few steps in. "Come back," he said. He took a few more steps. Sweet green sunlight dappled his Science Officer tunic. It was cool in the shade. He looked carefully around and could see no tracks the green man might have left. "Hello?" he said again, raising his voice. Some birds thrashed and dropped and rose, chittering. In the distance, tree-trunks leaned, half-fallen, in heavy slants. There was moss on them. He took another few steps forward. No trap snapped around his ankle, but the green man did not reappear.

At breakfast a week later, when his parents were eating at the same table again but still not talking much, Jeffrey said to his father's newspaper, "I saw a man in the woods."

"Christ almighty!" his father exclaimed, lowering the paper. He had dripped yellow egg yolk down his rotund plaid front. "I can't wear a clean shirt for five minutes!"

"Oh, Simon; it's nothing." Jeffrey's mother put down her coffee cup, stood up, went to the counter, picked up a washcloth, rinsed it under the tap, walked back to the table, and began wiping off her husband. Impatiently he took the cloth from her and wiped himself. She said, "Jeffrey Andrew Russell, did you go into those woods by yourself?"

"No, Mama. I just went to the edge."

"Jeffrey?" She turned her all-knowing, undeceivable gaze upon him. "Are you *sure* you're not fibbing to Mama?"

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"That's all I did, Mama. I just saw him on the edge." He shut his mouth. He had almost added, *Of the far pasture.*

His father put the washcloth aside. "Did he have a gun?"

"No." Jeffrey had been warned many times that hunters were always creeping on to the property and shooting animals illegally, another reason why he was forbidden to go into the woods alone, because hunters could think you were a deer and shoot you before they knew you were a boy.

"What did he look like?"

"Simon," said Jeffrey's mother, "you don't have to *grill* him that way."

"Will you please let me talk to the boy?"

"The *boy*?" Her tone was amused. Jeffrey shrank. "I believe your *son* has a *name*." She lit a cigarette and blew smoke elaborately. Jeffrey's father turned red.

"I am simply endeavoring to determine the facts of the matter, Rae," he snapped.

Jeffrey's mother shook her head and smiled to herself. To Jeffrey she said, "What did the man look like, darling?"

"Like one of those hippies on the Green in New Milford," Jeffrey said. "He didn't have any clothes on." His parents stiffened in unison and exchanged meaningful looks.

His father said to his mother over his head, "Those damn kids. I'd better call Harley Marsden." Harley Marsden was the town constable.

"Oh, Simon, they don't mean any harm."

Jeffrey's father pushed his chair back violently. Jeffrey shut his eyes. He heard the swinging door from the kitchen to the foyer open and shut; heavy steps; the telephone being dialed. His mother said to him, "I never want you going near those woods again. Not without Mama. Do you understand, Jeffrey?"

"Yes." He heard his father's grim voice talking into the receiver, but he could not hear the words clearly.

"Yes, *whom*?"

"Yes, Mother." He opened his eyes again and gave her a reassuring look. He was shocked to see tears on her cheeks. She looked away from him, blinking, and took another drag on her cigarette. Guilt doused him like cold rain water off a fir branch. "I'm sorry, Mama. I won't do it again."

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"Of course you won't, darling," she said. She gave him a brave smile and patted his arm. "Mama loves you, that's all. She loves you more than tongue can tell. She wouldn't want anything to happen to her precious Jeffie."

"He didn't do anything," Jeffrey whispered. She shushed him and stroked his arm, then his hair. His father shoved through the swinging door.

"Harley said he'd bring Rob over to look around," said Mr. Russell. "Those damn kids! I spend a fortune on 'No Trespassing' signs and I might as well be putting out a welcome mat." To Jeffrey he said, "When did this happen?"

"Last Saturday," Jeffrey said. His mother stood silently and turned to the dishes in the kitchen sink.

"Did you hear any shots from the woods that afternoon?"

"No." *Clink* went the dishes.

"Did he do anything or say anything to you?"

"No." Suddenly, he was afraid, not for himself, but for the green man.

"Do you think you could show Mr. Marsden where you saw the man?"

"Yes," he said. Later that day Harley and Rob, his beefy blond deputy, arrived. Jeffrey led them and his father to the far pasture where Vi was. Forbidden to accompany them, he watched the three tramp off into the woods, like two bowling pins taking a bowling ball on a hike. They came back in three hours, Jeffrey's father puffing and the two policemen shaking their heads. They had found the dead remains of a campfire and something else, something odd in a tree which they would not talk about in front of Jeffrey.

His mother put him to bed early after a dinner of thick ham sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies, which she had spent all day making, sheet after sheet of them, perfect and gleaming and fragrant. He lay upstairs in his bedroom, trying to translate the adult drones from the kitchen into language. He thought, *He'll never come back now. I'll never see him again.* He felt a great desolation.

Nothing happened for many days. School came, a new grade with all his old friends. He almost forgot the green man in his joy over the crackly and perfumed new books and the wonderful stacks of empty lined writing

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paper. He got E's in Spelling and Arithmetic and Reading, and he had a part in the Thanksgiving pageant, a pilgrim with a big round white cardboard collar. Hard frost killed all the flowers in the garden. Men came with a truck to fill the oil-burning furnace in the cellar. One night he woke up while it was still dark and saw snow drifting down like feathers through the porch light.

He got out of bed, padded to his bedroom window, and looked out. He had on his slip-slops, but his feet were still cold. At first he could only think of Christmas: snow meant Christmas was coming. He loved Christmas. He watched as the snow buried the back yard, the swing set, his mother's dead roses, the dark eaves of the Little House where his father's forbidden study was. He thought of the cow and the horse asleep in the barn. The cow slept lying down, but the horse slept standing up. His mother had told him that. He thought of snow falling over the silent woods. He wondered if the green man was still out there, somewhere. *He must have gone back to his commune*, he thought. *But what if he didn't? What if he didn't have a commune to go back to?*

He felt a pang like the pang he felt when his mother looked sad and lonely. He got back into bed and pulled the quilt up to his neck. He fell asleep and dreamed he was wading through a river of hot dry green cornstalks while his mother shouted to him from the kitchen door to come back, come back, come back. The next morning was Saturday. He rose early to smothered blank brightness. He got dressed and went downstairs to the kitchen. His mother was at the counter with her red and green Christmas apron on, *Fanny Farmer Cookbook* open, peering down her bifocals with flour and sugar in sacks around her. He said to her, "May I go out and play?"

"Don't I get a kiss first?" He went over to her and let her mash him again. Her lips tasted like vanilla extract. She smiled at him, her world, her joy, her own. "You put on your boots and your hood," she commanded him. "And your snow-pants."

"Yes, Mama," he said.

"*And* your gloves."

"I will." He smiled back at her and went out of the kitchen and into the hallway. In the hall he sat on the bottom of the stairs near the telephone stand and pulled on his red snow-pants, then his red rubber

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boots. They were hard to get on, but he did it. From the long coat-rack he took down his stuffed coat with the hood. He put it on and buttoned it up. He waddled back into the kitchen. His mother turned hurriedly from the spice cupboard to the sink and opened the tap. He watched her wash out a glass and put it on the drainboard. She turned smiling to him. "You look as snug as a bug in a rug," she said. "Are you going to make snow angels?"

"Yes," he said. After a moment he said, "Bye," and went outside into the snow.

It was a completely different world at once. The morning sun was bright and the morning sky was cloudless blue. The back yard stretched away, a flat unbroken expanse of dazzling white. He walked away from the house and onto the snow-covered lawn, leaving tracks with his red boots. He climbed the slick ladder of the jungle gym, paused at the top to wave at his mother, who was watching him through the kitchen door, then shot down the slide on his rump. He landed in a heap of snow and laughed. The metal of the slide gleamed clean behind him. He stood up, batted at his snow-pants with his gloves; snow powdered the air and went up his nose. He slid down the slide three more times, then wandered on through the yard, taking his time lest she be watching still, past his father's Little House, until he came to the lilac hedge with its hard brown sleeping buds. He walked through the opening in the hedge and out of sight of the kitchen door.

He began to run. It was awkward, in his leggings and boots; he slid a little and fell down once. There was no snow under the pine trees at the back of the Little House. He paused there on the needles to catch his breath. His father was already hard at work, typing. Smoke trickled from the Little House chimney. Jeffrey looked up at the brown-lit windows. Inside, he knew, there were walls and walls of books, and silence like the calm at the bottom of the lake. He hurried on.

He passed the cow barn and the horse stall and the ghostly rhubarb patch. He passed the corral, which in spring and summer was calf-deep manure. Even now, in places, the snow had melted into hoof-prints. On the far side of the corral, a low fieldstone wall marked the edge of the far pasture, but he did not head that way. He walked to the edge of what had been the vegetable garden. Snow had softened its hard lumps and ridges. Here and there grasses raised white plumes into the cold air, their

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undersides pale brown. There were no more cornstalks; his mother had them tilled under every fall. He stepped forward into the frozen furrows.

His head was buzzing, as though there were bees in his hair. *This is where the tomatoes were,* he thought. *This is where the potatoes were.* He had played one-potato, two-potato with his brother, who was in Vietnam. He came to the edge of the garden and the asparagus trench. A few old stiff spiny stalks still remained, dotted with dessicated red berries. His mother had always said never to eat anything without asking her first; it might be poisonous. He picked one of the asparagus berries and put it in his mouth. It tasted bitter, so he spit it out.

He crossed the asparagus trench and entered the meadow. The white trees of the woods lay waiting for him on the other side. The Klingons did not fire upon him. He passed the snowy hump of a black raspberry bush, and another. When he was close enough to see the green man's eyes, he stopped.

They were dark and fierce and full of love. They made him want to chase cows with a stick, to shout his name in church. The man was holding out his furred hand. Jeffrey thought of his mother's smell of tobacco and wine in the dark, of her mouth mashing his, of her precise knife-cuts at the kitchen counter. He thought of his fat father asking, "What are *you* going to have, Rae?" at the kitchen table, as though it was food she needed. He thought of Vi rotting in silence while wasps knocked themselves stupid against the windshield. He looked into the green man's eyes and said, "Could you please show me where the raccoons go when they go away and you don't see them?" The man nodded, very seriously. Jeffrey reached up and took his hand, and together the two of them turned and walked into the forest.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A MAMA'S BOY

SCREENWRITERS aren't as dumb as they look...in most movie reviews. I mean, if they were as unimaginative and self-indulgent as the critics of America have proclaimed them, they would do the natural write-what-you-know thing and make a *writer* the hero of their screenplays much more often then they do. But they have accepted the sad truth: The writer's life is a less than fascinating spectacle.

So, when a screenwriter shows up in a movie at all, he is more likely to be an embittered — if crucial — cameo (e.g., *The Player*) than the central character (as in the little seen, but oddly endearing, *The Big Picture*). Of all writers, journalists (*His Girl Friday, All the President's Men*) have certainly fared the best on screen, because their role is seen as an active one. They can be valiant investigators chasing down a life-saving or President-toppling exclusive.

Other types of authors rarely get the star treatment. And when they do, it's usually only as unavoidable remnants of the original novel upon which a movie is based. (Novelists can indulge their self-referential tendencies much more freely than scripters.) Even then, the writer is little more than, as in *Sophie's Choice*, the witness/scribe of the high drama of other people's lives.

Being a "serious" writer helps. If you're a Hemingway, they might even make a movie about your callow youth. But if you're a master of pop. cult., chances are you'll get no respect — and even less screen time. Outside of oddities like *Misery* (wherein, let's face it, Kathy Bates's

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backwoods psycho was much more compelling than James Caan's writer hero), and the occasional dangerous-to-know detective story writer hero (a figure much more common on television than on the big screen), those who write for the masses have been largely ignored.

But maybe that's changing. Two — count them, two — movies this past winter focused on Science Fiction/Fantasy writers as protagonists. That's the good news. The bad is that both were romantically challenged, socially inept mama's boys.

Sad-sack auteur Albert Brooks made it to most major cineplexes with his latest movie, *Mother*. In it, he plays an L.A.-based science fiction writer named John Henderson. Never a best-seller as an author, John has also been less than successful as a lover and husband. After his second marriage ends in an acrimonious divorce (that strips his suburban house of all furniture but a single chair), he complains to a friend that the one thing all of his five major relationships have had in common is that the women in his life never believed in him.

Not content to simply blame his old girlfriends for his vicissitudes, John contemplates the root cause of all his problems. And who better to blame for his miserable life than the woman who gave birth to him, mother Beatrice (Debbie Reynolds)? Henderson decides that if he is ever to achieve any happiness, he must first come to terms with dear old mom. So he packs a few belongings into his convertible and heads for the Bay Area to return to the nest of his mildly alarmed mother.

The writing here, by Brooks and his long-time collaborator, Monica Johnson, is often funny, but generally sitcom-predictable. There are gags about the old food in mom's refrigerator and recurring bits about her technophobia and her cheery willingness to discuss her son's private life with total strangers. There is even an easily anticipated subplot about John's sibling rivalry with his younger brother, Jeff (Rob Morrow).

Beatrice Henderson offers more affection to her second son, a successful sports agent with a wife and kids. At least that's the way Brooks's hero perceives it — and there is never any doubt that the viewpoint of the film is his. For her firstborn, she serves up (besides ancient sherbet and wilted iceberg) a steady dose of disapproval and doubt. "This is my son...the other one," she tells

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acquaintances. And when John tells her that he's working on a sequel to what she refers to as "the space thing," she questions the wisdom of bringing back "those characters."

At times, *Mother* plays like a rather tedious exercise in mother-bashing. (And, at 49, isn't Brooks/Henderson a little old to disrupt an adult life completely to run home to mommy and obsess on approval issues with her?) What makes the film enjoyable is that, although Brooks and Johnson do dump on her, they nonetheless take their *Mother* a step beyond the castrating shrew stereotype. Beatrice is a complex woman with talents and dreams her son was unaware of. She has a life — and a sex life, to boot. And although she knows how unjust her son is being, she is magnanimous (and, yes, loving) enough to let him get away with it. When *Mother* works — and it *does* much of the time — it has as much to do with casting as it does scripting, however. For I don't believe *Mother* would be half as successful without the sly, smart performance of Debbie Reynolds in the title role. Albert Brooks deserves considerable credit for coaxing Debbie Reynolds out of her Vegas retirement from the movie biz. Those who remember Reynolds as a perky song-and-dance star (*Singing in the Rain*, etc.) or an All-American sweetheart (*Tammy and the Bachelor*, etc.) may find her nuanced performance here a bit of a revelation. And it's just that element of surprise that makes movie-going such a joy.

Watch *Mother* for the pleasure of seeing Albert Brooks at his kvetching, self-pitying best as a writer-director-performer. Better yet, see it for Debbie Reynolds's triumphant return as a movie star after a twenty-five-year absence. But don't see it for any insights into the sf/fantasy writer's life. There aren't any.

Although it's important to the plot that John Henderson be a writer, it is immaterial that he is in the sf field. It merely allows for a few jokes about book titles and strange characters. And it provides an excuse for him to re-decorate his boyhood bedroom with interesting pop artifacts like robot toys and posters for *Planet of the Apes* and *Barbarella*. Reason enough? Why not. It's rather nice to see sf writers getting a little on-screen attention, no matter what the motivation.

But for those looking for a movie that actually tries to say something about a man's life as a

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writer, a much more interesting movie is one that will be—natch—a lot harder to find. And that is the debut feature directed by Dan Ireland entitled *The Whole Wide World.*

The film is adapted from a memoir, *One Who Walked Alone,* written by Novalyne Price Ellis. The book recounts her friendship (and abortive romance) with pulp-master Robert E. Howard. Howard is best known, of course, as the creator of Conan the Barbarian. And although he experimented in poetry, as well as a variety of pulp formulas and series characters, Howard will always be remembered as the father of Conan, and, thereby, one of the founders of the sub-genre that would be called, variously, epic fantasy, heroic fantasy, and sword and sorcery.

Conan has lived on, since his creator's death in 1936, in a plethora of bastardized product lines that includes stories, novels, comic books, feature films, and (soon) a television series. The staying-power of the massive Cimmerian is impressive, to say the least. But it is hardly surprising. Few characters have so resonated with audiences hungering for a vivid representation of unadulterated and untamed masculinity. He takes what he wants when he wants it, this icon from the Hyborian age. Conan is a noble brute who lives by his sword and his own code (of sorts), but is otherwise unfettered by social controls.

What a powerful fantasy! And for none more so than his creator. For Robert Howard was a young man mightily constrained by the economics of the depression, the disapproval of his small Texas town (who thought he should go out and get a real job and stop writing that "filth" of his), and, most of all, by family ties that bound him to his sickly mother just as hard as a Hyborian hero might be bound to a wheel of torture.

It is the story of this tormented soul that Mrs. Ellis hoped to tell from her first-hand knowledge. She succeeded. And although her book achieved something considerably less than best-seller status, it made the leap to the big screen because she had friends in the business.

As a teacher of speech for many years, Novalyne Price Ellis inspired many students. Among them an actor/producer named Benjamin Mouton and a writer named Michael Scott Myers. When they read their favorite high school teacher's book, they vowed to bring it to the screen. To this end, they approached Dan

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Ireland, a producer and studio executive at Cineville for help. Ireland was so moved by Ellis's recollections of Howard that he decided to take a mighty leap and direct the film himself.

The result is, as you could guess, a labor of love by commited filmmakers. And that kind of dedication is reason enough to hunt out *The Whole Wide World*. But there are plenty of other reasons to see this film. Foremost among them is that *The Whole Wide World* is a very good movie, with breathtaking cinematography of rural Texas by Claudio Roca, and two phenomenal performances by Vincent D'Onofrio as Howard, and Renee Zellweger as Novalyne Price.

The story begins in 1934 when a former beau introduces Novalyne to a writer friend of his named Bob Howard. Novalyne has trained to be a teacher, but dreams of being a writer, so she is intrigued by this badly dressed and loudly loquacious fellow. He's a real writer, who's actually managed to sell and publish his stories widely.

Novalyne would love to pick up a few tricks of the trade. So when she takes a teaching job in Howard's home town, she wastes no time in calling Howard ("the greatest pulp writer in the whole world") to reestablish their acquaintance. Unfortunately, Bob's mother (Ann Wedgeworth) does everything she can to keep Novalyne away from her son. But the willful Miss Price, who is not one to be put off by an interfering mother, barges ahead. And soon, Bob and Novalyne are taking long country drives to talk about writing, society, and everything else under the prairie moon.

For both, it is the kind of meeting of the minds that is hard to come by in small-town Texas. And soon, it develops into something more. But Howard, who can hold forth at length about the decay of civilization and the latest adventure of Conan ("the damnedest bastard that ever was"), holds back when it comes to committing himself to Novalyne. He has already devoted himself to another woman — his mother.

After a single heady kiss, the relationship quickly disintegrates between Novalyne and Bob. He becomes more and more caught up in the care of his ailing mother. She gets more caught up in teaching and continuing her own education. And, practical and independent woman that she is, she realizes that she needs to move on if she hopes to find a man capable of a healthy relationship.

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The Whole Wide World is, above all else, a love story about lost chances and bad timing. It is the great romance that should have happened, but didn't. It's an old story. But seldom has it been told so heartbreakingly well. Vincent D'Onofrio, one of our finest actors, does a wonderful job of capturing Howard's creative fury and sexual longing, and, finally, his tortured descent into despair. And Renee Zellweger is amazing as the "spitfire" Novalyne.

D'Onofrio is so good and so BIG in his performance, a lesser actor would have been blown off this screen by his bravado. Not Ms. Zellweger. She holds her own, and then some. (And it was this role that helped win her her co-starring role with Tom Cruise in the mega-hit *Jerry Maguire.*)

After reading Ellis's memoir, and watching the fine film it became, I couldn't help but wonder whether a little mother-blaming was also at work here. Was Mrs. Howard (and the vaguely incestuous possessiveness toward her son depicted in the film) really the villain of the piece? Novalyne Price clearly believed so. And, although she may be a less than impartial judge, certain facts cannot be disputed.

After Novalyne had left for graduate school in Louisiana, Mrs. Howard's health failed completely. When Bob Howard was informed by a nurse that his mother was near death, he went out to his car and shot himself in the head. He died within hours. And his mother died the next day.

So, what are these two movies telling us? That science fiction and fantasy novelists are too hung up on their mommies? We'll just have to wait for Hollywood to provide us with a little more evidence of their attitudes towards fantasy writers.

Or maybe we already have it. As I write this, Kevin (*Mallrats*) Smith is about to release the last of his New Jersey Trilogy films. And in this one, *Chasing Amy*, all three leads are comic book writer/artists. (Fantasy authors of a different stripe.)

Here, mothers play no direct role. (What a relief!) But that isn't to say that the characters don't have significant relationship problems and identity crises. For example, the female lead, Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams), is a tad confused about her sexual orientation and seems to be unaware that the word "bi-sexual" was coined just for folks like herself.

Therefore, despite an active

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youth spent boffing both guys and gals, she calls herself a lesbian and is unaccountably shocked to find herself in love with a male comics scribe, Holden (Ben Affleck), who, despite soulful eyes and the requisite facial hair of a slacker heartthrob, turns out to be a considerable jerk, not unlike his comics partner, Banky (Jason Lee), who is a belligerent creep from the start.

Whew! Give me John Henderson and the star-crossed lovers from Cross Plains, Texas, any day. And while you're at it, summon forth the spin-doctors. I think sf/fantasy writers might have a little image problem in tinseltown.

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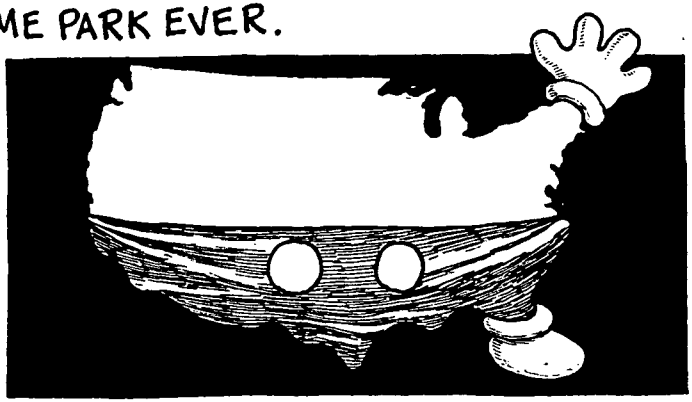

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During the summer, your average ballfield attracts its share of insects (not to mention a few pop flies). But as this story reminds us, the biggest pests don't usually go away just by swatting at them...

Michael Libling is new to the science fiction field, but he's not new to the writing world. A former student of Mordecai Richler, he has written speeches, motivational sermons, commercials, ad campaigns, and a variety of other sorts of nonfiction for more than a decade from his home in Montreal.

Mosquito League

By Michael Libling

WHAT STRUCK ME FIRST about Benny Clay were the dead mosquitoes. The rest of us would sit in the dugout slapping and scratching while Benny would sit on the bench, hands on his knees, as relaxed as if he were home watching *Leave It to Beaver*. We'd end up with bites; Benny would end up with dead mosquitoes hanging all over him. Limp legs. Limp wings. Limp whatever. It was really something to see.

"I think it's my blood," he explained. "They start to bite me and that's it; they die. Once it happened with a bee, too. Right here," he said, poking himself in a stain of freckles. "I didn't even know I had a bee in me till Miss Caprice told me to go wash my face." Miss Caprice had been his grade five teacher in wherever he lived before he moved to Howell. He had mentioned the town a couple of times, but it wasn't interesting enough for me to bother remembering. In fact, I didn't give much thought to any of the towns Benny mentioned. He had lived in a lot of dull places, some even duller than Howell.

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Benny wanted to be a second baseman. Trouble was, he couldn't field or hit worth a darn. Coach Ragemeyer said he was afraid of the ball. He shut his eyes every time a grounder shot his way and bailed out at the plate, even if the pitch was a mile outside. "You're worse than a girl, Clay! Maybe we should start calling you Jenny?" And that's exactly what a lot of the kids did. Strange thing was, it didn't seem to bother him any worse than the mosquitoes did. I'd never met anyone quite like him.

"How come nothing seems to bug you, Benny?" I asked him one day, a couple of innings after Coach Ragemeyer tore into him for letting another grounder scoot between his legs.

"Stuff bothers me all right, but there's nothing I can do about it, so I keep my feelings inside."

"Wish I could do that," I said. "I usually say something dumb — and then get jumped on."

"I know," Benny said. "I couldn't believe it when you stood up to Gilpin. He really belted you, didn't he?" Gilpin was a big jerk catcher for the Briarwood Braves. He was about the only kid in the league who wore spikes. He stressed the fact by leaving his mark every chance he got — usually on somebody's face. I warned him that if he tried it with me, I'd make him eat his glove. Well, he did, and I didn't.

I was small for my age, and, I guess, my brain must have matched. If only my mouth had, too. Next to baseball, getting beaten up seemed to be my favorite pastime.

I rolled up my right pant leg. "If you look real close, you can still see where the bugger bit me after he spiked me. And under here," I raised my shirt, "is where he clawed me. You'd think a kid that big wouldn't have to fight dirty, but he does."

"Did he do that, too?" Benny asked, pointing to the yellow bruise on my shoulder, just where my neck gets started.

"Nah! That's from the Skyler game and Evans."

"Figures. Evans has used his elbow on me a few times, too. Don't understand why he has to play like that."

I spun around and showed Benny my back. "Here's where he kicked me after he knocked me down."

"You ever win a fight, Brian?"

"Not yet. But I will," I said. "I'll get back at them some day. I hate bullies. Hate their guts."

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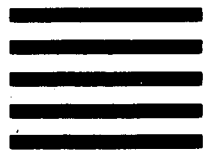

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"I hate them, too," Benny said. "But I'm not going to mix it up and get hurt even worse. If Evans wants to elbow me, I don't care, as long as he doesn't do anything else. When guys like him and Gilpin start up with me, I try to make myself invisible."

"Does it work?"

"Sometimes, I think."

"How can you tell?"

"When they don't hit me a second time."

"Maybe I should try that," I said.

"It wouldn't hurt." Benny laughed.

I joined him. "Yeah! It wouldn't hurt."

"Still, you're lucky, Brian."

"Lucky? Me?"

"At least, you can play ball. I stink. Coach says you could go right to the top if you put your mind to it. Says you're the best shortstop he's seen in years."

"Ragemeyer's an asshole. Only reason he coaches is so he can sell life insurance to our parents. Anyhow, that's what Billy says." Billy was the coach's son.

It was then we struck the deal. I'd teach Benny how to play ball and he'd teach me how to be invisible.

First thing I taught him was to stop wearing shirts with red and white stripes running across. "Fat kids shouldn't wear them, Benny. Makes you look like that tub in the Dubble Bubble comics."

No wonder Benny wore Huskies. His father was a candy salesman, supplying almost every confectionery up and down the coast. The first time Benny showed me his cellar, I felt like Hansel and Gretel must have when they stumbled into the witch's house. The floor was cluttered with teetering cases of 12s, 24s, 36s and 48s, plastered with names like Hershey's and Topps and Mars and Tootsie, while huge jars of goodies strutted across the walls and tabletops. Jelly beans. Jujubes. Blackballs. Wax lips. Honeymoons. Marshmallow bunnies. Licorice pipes. Candy cigarettes.

Benny would check in with his parents a few times a day and I'd tag along. It paid off. When his father was in town, he'd stuff our pockets with jawbreakers, sunflower seeds, peanuts — you name it. All for free, too.

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His mother would pour us fresh lemonade, pink for Benny, white for me. It was something I never understood. At my house, if I was having pink lemonade, my friends would get it, too. Usually, though, my mother would just open a bottle of Hires.

Anyhow, most of the time, the kitchen visits went like this:

"Being Benny's friend pays dividends, doesn't it?" His mother would smile, lips tight, as if she were holding in her front teeth.

I would nod. I wasn't sure what dividends were, but I sensed she knew what she was talking about.

"But you must not be Benny's friend just for the treats, you know? That would make you a false friend. The Bible says that false friends go straight to Hell. And you would not want that to happen, would you? You are going to watch out for Benny, aren't you?"

Watch out for him? Jesus! He was twice my size. What did she expect me to do? I would shake my head. It was plain to me that more than a few of Benny's ex-friends were on their way to Hell at that very moment.

"Watch out for Benny," she would say, "and I promise he will watch out for you. Now, would you like another nice glass of lemonade, Brian?"

"Could I please have the pink this time, like Benny, Mrs. Clay?"

"No, you cannot," she would say.

Once, I asked Benny why his mother would never let me have the pink lemonade. "Some day, she might," he answered.

I preferred Benny's father. He didn't talk so much. And he didn't hold back on *any* candies.

Although the fringe benefits of Benny's friendship were nice, the in-betweens were no piece of cake — or, for that matter, handful of jujubes. Teaching Benny was only slightly easier than, maybe, calling up a girl. Or convincing Miss Cooke that Snapper really did pee on my homework.

Ragemeyer was right. Benny was afraid of the ball. Pain terrified him.

"Believe me, Benny, the fear of pain is worse than the pain itself." I'd heard the line in a movie.

"That's what the guys who dish out the pain always say," Benny replied.

"We'll start with a punch for a punch," I said.

"Huh?"

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"I'll punch you in the arm and then you'll punch me. We keep going until one of us shouts 'uncle.'"

"Uncle," Benny shouted.

"We haven't started yet," I said. "You first. You hit me first."

Something brushed my arm.

"Was that it?" I asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Jesus, Benny, you got to punch harder than that. I barely felt it."

"I don't like to punch. It hurts my hand."

"Have it your way. But now it's my turn."

He shut his eyes and scrunched up his mouth till his lips twisted into a pretzel. I gave him a quick jab on the shoulder. It was hard, but no way near my best shot.

"Uncle!" Benny shouted. "Uncle, uncle, uncle, uncle, uncle, uncle," he yelped, hopping about like a toad on a heated trash can cover. (I know, because we'd heated up a trash can cover and tossed a toad on just the summer before. I never forgot what it looked like.)

As for Benny's part, he probably didn't find teaching me all that easy either.

His philosophy was simple. "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but keeping my mouth shut will never hurt me."

"I've never heard that version before," I said.

"It's the *right* version," he assured. "Keeping your mouth shut works two ways. First, the bullies aren't likely to notice you. And second, if they do start roughing you up, and you keep your mouth shut, they'll just get bored and go away. Usually, before they do too much damage."

"So if I start getting punched out, I shouldn't say a word? Just let them do it to me?"

"Uh-huh. They'll finish with you a lot quicker."

"Gee, I don't know if I could do that. If somebody's hitting me, I've got to hit back."

"The trick is not to get hit in the first place. That's why keeping your mouth shut right from the start is so important. It makes you invisible."

In the next game against Briarwood, Gilpin hit a double off the tip of Benny's glove. It was the closest Benny had come to stopping a ball all

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season. Nonetheless, I could hear Ragemeyer cursing, raging like a circus geek on the top step of the dugout.

Rounding first, Gilpin spied Benny lumbering over to cover second. "Out of my way, lardboy," he taunted, driving his shoulder into Benny's gut as he pulled up at the base.

Both benches roared hilarious approval. *Both benches*! (I guess that shouldn't have surprised me. Fostering team spirit had never been one of Ragemeyer's strengths.) "Laaaaaa-rrrrrrd boy," they laughed. "Laaaaaa-rrrrrrd boy." Encouraged, Gilpin body-checked Benny out toward center field. Benny tripped over his own heels and landed flat on his butt. He didn't say a word. But he sure wasn't invisible. Not to me, anyhow.

Gilpin shrugged. Then turned to me at short.

"Well, if it isn't the wise ass — the *short* short! Seems to me I got some unfinished business with you," he said, pounding right fist into left palm.

I began to swallow my lower lip and a good part of my chin.

"Better stay out of my way, you little shrimp, or I'm going to bury you under third."

I stared at the ground, waiting for the invisibility to kick in. I knew Benny was watching.

"What's the matter, loser, too chicken to face me man to man?"

My glove missed him by a good two yards. His first punch caught me in the gut, so hard I think his fist bounced off the front of my backbone. I don't remember where his second landed.

"And you were doing so well," said Benny.

BY THE FIRST WEEK of June, Benny no longer closed his eyes when the ball came his way. By the third week, he was able to stop most grounders, usually with his body if not with his glove. Suddenly, Benny understood that a bruise could be a badge of honor. By the end of the month, he was handling almost everything except line drives and real high infield pops. He didn't have much speed or range, couldn't turn the double play for beans, but he was still playing an acceptable second base. Coach Ragemeyer began to call him Benny, again. In fact, *Jennies* were few and far between.

As for me, I'd managed to stay out of fights for over a month. We faced

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the Braves and Gilpin two times in that period, and the Skyler Sox, with Evans, three times, but I didn't let them bait me. I kept working on making myself invisible, keeping my mouth shut. Of course, Coach Ragemeyer benched me for a lot of those innings. "I hate to waste my best shortstop, but you're too damn scrappy, Brian," he said. "I can't take a chance on one of those boys maiming you. At least," he grinned, "until your folks take a policy out on you."

When it came to July, however, Ragemeyer couldn't afford to leave me out of the lineup. Two more games, and we needed them both to claim a playoff spot. And wouldn't you know it, the two were against Briarwood and Skyler — Gilpin and Evans.

Surprise. Surprise. Five days before the Briarwood game, Mrs. Clay poured me a glass of pink lemonade.

I couldn't believe it.

"You have earned this," she said. "You have been a true friend to Benny."

"Yeah, I have," I said, just to make sure she wouldn't forget the fact.

"Drink up. There is a lot more where this came from," she promised.

It looked like pink lemonade. It smelled like pink lemonade. It tasted like pink lemonade. But it didn't go down like pink lemonade. It washed over my tongue, seemed to hesitate, then drifted past my tonsils, dallying, taking its time, slow and easy, coating as it crept, not a bit eager to reach my belly. It was cold, and quenching, and delicious (the best I'd ever tasted), but, strangely, it left my insides warm and fuzzy — *all of my insides*, from my belly up and from my belly down.

"It feels funny," I said.

Benny shrugged.

"Like it goes down extra slow or something," I said, tipping my glass for the final drops, letting the ice cubes tap against my teeth.

"My mother sweetens it with something like honey."

"Oh?" I nodded.

Mrs. Clay refilled my glass.

I cannot say how many glasses of Mrs. Clay's pink lemonade I drank that week, but it was a lot. I guess I was making up for lost time.

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We had an early two run lead, but Briarwood tied it up in the third on three hits, followed by an error by Benny. Gilpin led the ragging for the Braves. Every insult any fat kid ever endured must have been fired Benny's way in that inning alone. Still, he stood his ground, invisible like always. I had to hand it to him. He might have been the biggest chicken I ever met, but there was something brave about him, too.

I'm sure Ragemeyer would have taken Benny out then and there, but the League rules wouldn't allow it. Every kid had to play a minimum number of innings. Prior to game time, the Briarwood coach had informed the league commissioner that the Clay boy — *"that load of blubber who plays second"* — was way under the minimum. Benny would have to play every remaining inning for Howell, including any playoff games, just to break even. When he heard the ruling, Coach Ragemeyer bit the button off his cap and almost choked to death. Billy whacked him on the back with his first base glove and the button shot clear across the infield.

We got the go-ahead run in the fifth, but the Braves came right back with two more in their half. Benny made another error that inning, but the run had already scored. Even though the error didn't matter, the abuse flew something terrible. Fathead. Lardass. Fatso. Pansy. Blimpo. Dickweed. Dickhead. Fairy. Homo. Fat-ass. Ass-man. Blubber boy. Craphead. And, yet again, *Jenny Jenny Jenny Jenny*. Our bench and the other guys in the field joined right in. "Shut up," I shouted. "He's doing his best." But nobody heard me, except Benny.

What bothered me most was that Benny was actually playing a pretty decent game. He had made quite a few nice stops and came close on a couple of double plays. Even caught a pop-up, the kind he usually ran the wrong way from. So when he hit the first double of his life in the top of the ninth to put the tying run in scoring position, I couldn't have been happier. So what if it would've been a triple for most runners? This was pretty darn special. Nobody was calling Benny names then. In fact, it was the first time I'd ever heard Benny being cheered. It felt so good, I thought I was going to cry. But I pushed that notion out of my head quickly enough. Being Benny's friend had hurt my reputation enough. Crying would've finished me for good.

There were two out when Billy Ragemeyer came to the plate. He

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swung on the first pitch and lofted a leaky fly ball to medium right. That should have been the game, but the Braves messed up. They must have thought it was going to drop foul; no one made an effort to reel it in. It landed a good foot fair. Everybody seemed to freeze from the shock, and then Coach Ragemeyer started hollering, "Run, Clay, run."

Benny was plodding round third by the time the right fielder got to the ball. Even way over in the first base dugout we could hear his breathing. It reminded me of a wounded wart hog I'd seen in one of those boring nature movies from Disney — *Wart Hog Wonders of Wallawallaland* or something.

He was halfway home before the ball was airborne. That's when Gilpin snapped off his catcher's mask and whipped it like a flying saucer right into Benny's face. But Benny rumbled on with barely a misstep. He kept on coming, blood streaming out of what had been his nose.

"Attaboy, Clay!" Coach Ragemeyer cried.

"Go, Benny," I shouted.

Then Gilpin caught Benny with a spike on the shin and an elbow to the throat, and my friend went down like a sack of mashed potatoes. Gilpin straddled him, his face knotted up meaner than I'd ever seen it, as the pitcher ran the ball the final few feet.

Coach Ragemeyer argued interference, but the umpire would hear none of it. Not surprising, considering we were the visiting team and the ump probably wanted to keep his job at the Briarwood tire plant, the outfit that just happened to sponsor the Braves.

Gilpin held the ball in his hand till Benny came to, and with a big, poison grin, he leaned down, put the ball to Benny's chin, and hissed, "You're out, Fatso."

It was this moment that Benny chose not to be invisible. He exploded into Gilpin, a sputtering, flailing mass of fists and phlegm. But nothing seemed to land as hard as it should or in any place it could do much damage. For a spell, it looked like Benny was trying to shove his nose into Gilpin's mouth, but Gilpin would have none of it. A blow. A feint. A jab. A twist. And Gilpin was behind him, Benny's head deflating in the crook of Gilpin's arm. "I want to hear you cry 'uncle,' Fatso. Or I'm going to twist your fat little skull right off your fat little neck."

I must have leaped out of the dugout, over the field and onto Gilpin's

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back in a single stride. I wrapped my arms around his neck and wrenched with every bit of my weight. Benny hit the ground and rolled to safety, and there I was, riding Gilpin up onto the pitcher's mound like a broncobuster going for broke. No matter which way he turned, I turned with him. He tried wracking me off against the backstop. He tried flipping me over his head. He tried shaking me loose by rolling across the on-deck circle. He tried prying my fingers apart one by one. But nothing worked. *Nothing was going to work*. And then, at home plate, he sank his teeth into my arm.

A fleshy, bloody and hungry bite.

A bite that dug for bone.

All right, I admit my eyes got teary; I couldn't help it. It hurt so bad. Finally, I had nothing left. I slid down his back, feet first, onto the plate, and waited for the worst that was sure to come.

It was one of those moments you read about, the kind that seem to last forever.

I wobbled on my heels, staring up at him, my arm in his mouth, my blood dripping from his mouth. And he stood, staring at me, swaying just a little, his teeth in my arm, his lips and chin oozing with my blood. I wanted to back away, but couldn't. *He didn't look like he was planning on moving anywhere*. The only sound was his nostrils, humming hoarsely, sputtering feebly, until there was no sound at all.

I realized then that Gilpin was hanging from my outstretched arm.

Limp legs.

Limp arms.

Limp mouth.

I shuddered, shook, shook again. My arm fell free, and the Briarwood Braves' catcher crumpled onto home plate.

I vaguely remember somebody saying, "I think he's dead." And Coach Ragemeyer helping me to the bench with: "You're going to need stitches, and probably some shots or something. It's a shame your parents didn't listen and buy the accident coverage I told them to."

Benny sent a basket to the hospital for me. It was packed with all sorts of good stuff: a Three Musketeers, a Fifth Avenue, six licorice pipes, a

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couple of strawberry whips, a wad of suckers, some loose jellybeans, and, poking up through the center, a big, red thermos of pink lemonade.

Dear Brian,

My mother always says that sooner or later bullies bite off more than they can chew.

Thanks for being the best friend I ever had.

Your friend always,

Benny Clay

P. S. Don't drink it all at once. It keeps almost forever and a little goes a long way.

I never did see Benny again. The story was that his father had been transferred to another town with a name I can't recall.

The police got involved and some medical guy came down from the state capital. My parents were pretty worried. I heard from more than a few people that I might have to go to reform school or something, even though I hadn't done anything. But all that ended when word came out that Gilpin had had a heart attack. It was quite a relief, and I bought the line along with everyone else. In fact, I believed it until the following spring when I began to notice the mosquitoes on my arm. Dead. Just hanging there.

Of course, it upset me for a bit. Then I pulled the thermos closer and checked the schedule to see when the Skyler team and Evans were coming to town.

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Michael Martin finds that he cannot get away from comics. His fiction-writing career began while he was serving as Marvel Comics' West Coast Field Rep, and the issue of Marvel's Star Trek: Deep Space Nine *comic book series that he coauthored is due out in a couple of months. As you'll see in the following story, however, Mr. Martin has a decidedly different take on comic book superheroes. It's not all fun and games, you know.*

Giants in the Earth

By Michael A. Martin

CAPTAIN PARADOX'S CALLS always came at the most inopportune times. Fiona and I had just collapsed, entwined together on her cool sheets, after a show, a quick Moroccan dinner, yet another argument about my lifestyle, and finally a furious bout of lovemaking. Sleep was settling over my eyes like a heavy gauze when the beeper I'd left on the dresser made its distinctive "ping!" sound.

"Don't answer, Craig," she groaned, grabbing my arm.

I carefully disentangled myself from the sheet, and from Fiona. "I'm afraid I have to." I began to put on my trousers, started searching for my shoes.

"A story?"

I nodded, trying not to look guilty. I hated lying to her.

"Could be a Pulitzer," I said, as always. I donned my shirt and shoes and kissed her on the forehead. She was still pouting, as always, when the apartment door closed behind me. Another perfectly wonderful Sunday, ruined.

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The morning sun was just beginning to paint the sky yellow and blue. I ducked into an alley half a block from Fiona's apartment. No one was there.

"Is it bad, Paradox?" I said into the beeper after thumbing the transmit button.

"It's bad all right," came Paradox's deep resonant voice, preternaturally clear even through the tiny speaker. He always sounded like he was doing an impression of Sergeant Preston of the Mounties. But Captain Paradox was the genuine article. He really, actually, genuinely sounded like that.

It scared me sometimes.

"How bad?" I asked, as if I didn't know what he was going to say next.

"I have finally finished my work on the Probability Key," he said, his voice a dignified, rolling ocean. "At long last we can begin to make the...*adjustments* we've discussed."

That sounded too much like good news. "What's the bad news, sir?"

The Captain's voice took on the somber tones of the sepulcher. "Thibodeaux is back," he said. "He wants the Key, lad, and very badly. His appearance will either bring our plan to a swift dénouement, or else it will destroy it utterly. Get here as quickly as you can, Quantum Boy."

Dramatic, as always. But it didn't sound good. I flicked another button on the beeper, releasing a minute trace of the quantum foam from its magnetic bottle. Frost-bitten millipedes ran up and down my spine as probabilities rearranged themselves. My jacket and slacks liquefied and flowed around me, then solidified into a familiar skin-tight lemon-lime costume.

"On my way," I said and stuffed the beeper into a belt-pouch. My cape billowed with a flourish as I vaulted into the brightening sky, meditating on how much I had come to hate the name "Quantum Boy."

Captain Paradox kept his lab and secret headquarters discreetly hidden behind the façade of a third-floor apartment on Portland's fashionable Northwest 23rd Avenue. The Captain's discretion, outright secrecy really, isn't all that unusual for a Super. It's been *de rigueur* for the Super lifestyle since the Great Lawrence Whoops created most of us back in the early 1970's.

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In those early days, Supers had been considered freaks, heresies, even blasphemies. Now, only a couple of short years remain on the Millennial clock. To some, the Supers represent salvation. Others see us as the Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The Willamette River sparkled serenely beneath me, and for a moment I recaptured the heady adolescent thrill of flight for its own sake. I stretched my body taut in the wind, limbs outstretched like a child imitating an airplane. I watched the river, as yet undisturbed by boats, as it dropped away behind me.

The early-morning traffic had already begun its westward bustle across the Morrison and Burnside Bridges. Horns honked and arms gestured from a dozen vehicles beneath me.

Fans or detractors?

My flight path curved downward over the avenues of the Northwest quadrant of Portland. I grazed the rooftops and could see a few early risers unlocking their offices and storefronts, getting ready for the day. A heavyset woman in a flower-print dress looked up and saw me, an "O" of surprise instantly forming on her lips. A block away, a paperboy on a mountain bike flung a newspaper and gestured a one-handed "thumbs-up" to me. Across the street, a dour-faced man in a business suit flipped me the hairy bird.

I decided to ignore my adoring public and concentrate on the improbable act of flying. I knew as well as anybody that Supers have threatened public safety as often as they'd preserved it, so it never surprised me that certain folks had no use for us, whatever our ideology.

Their resentment is understandable. These days, it seems all I ever read about in the papers are stories of meta-human thieves, terrorists, and world-beaters and all the havoc they wreak. Sometimes they're captured, or killed, or driven off by the more altruistic Supers. Other times, there simply aren't enough benevolent Supers around to land the crippled jet, or to defuse the terrorist's bomb, or to keep the downtown skyscraper from being anti-gravved from its foundations into Low Earth Orbit. On occasions such as these, a whole lot of civilians are toast. Their resentment is understandable.

I could see from the air that half of Captain Paradox's roof was missing, flensed from the four walls as though by some impossibly sharp

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carving knife. I could see into the lab, which resembled a three-dimensional cutaway diagram, strewn with upended computer equipment. My pulse raced. What the hell could have done this?

I touched down, landing in a careful crouch on the roof of the Captain's lab.

I pulled the beeper out, whispered into it. "Captain Paradox?" I tried again. Nothing. I closed my eyes behind the little domino mask and saw Fiona, still pouting. Craig Cavanaugh, Quantum-fucking-Boy. Why the hell was I still doing this shit at thirty? Taking a deep breath, I very deliberately jumped through the gap in the roof, my cape trailing behind me like an emerald contrail.

The lab had evidently been ransacked in a hurry during the ten minutes it had taken me to fly from Southeast Portland across the Willamette and north along the shore into the Northwest quadrant. Computers and monitors and glass piping and aluminum conduits were scattered and shattered, as though they had been not only thrown about by something strong and malevolent, but had also exploded from within. But there was no sign of anyone else in the room.

I wondered which of Captain Paradox's many foes could have been responsible. There was no shortage of hostile Supers whom Paradox had, over the years, given cause for revenge. The colossal destruction was consistent with some of the physically powerful Supers, like Red Rampage or Pallet Jack. I tried to cross at least a few of Paradox's enemies off the list: If Top Quark had been the attacker, for instance, it was likely that nothing would remain of the whole block but a crater lined with radioactive glass. T.E.N.D.R.I.L. agents were usually more subtle than this, but who knew?

I wondered if a clever scientific-Super, somebody like Vitriol or Wishcraft, might camouflage his search of the place with gratuitous destruction, simply to throw me and Paradox off his scent.

Then I noticed Captain Paradox's costume lying amid the rubble. The cowl, the red tights, and the yellow gloves and boots were all attached, as though he had been standing in the lab in full costume when...

I carefully picked the costume off the floor, and reached into its still-attached utility belt. A few white crystals, like sugar cubes, pattered from

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the limp scarlet cowl to the floor. I dropped the costume then, in revulsion.

"Welcome to your death," rasped a sandpaper voice from behind me. I hadn't seen him standing there, but it stood to reason that I couldn't be all alone in Captain Paradox's lab. Not after what had evidently happened here so very recently. That would have been...improbable, to say the least.

"Professor Thaddeus Thibodeaux," I said, feigning calm. I turned very deliberately toward him, watching him carefully. I wanted to be ready for anything, any quick motion, any sudden grab for a weapon.

He smiled, reptile-like. I thought of the Grinch as he made a deep, mock-courteous bow. He was thin, old, cadaverous. Thibodeaux could only be described as classically, melodramatically *E*vil.

I tried to sound threatening. "What the hell have you done with Captain Paradox? If you've hurt him, I swear..."

Thaddeus Thibodeaux tsk-tsked at me, still grinning that nasty grin. "My boy," said Thibodeaux in that oh-so-carefully cultivated mid-Atlantic accent. "The man to whom you refer is, or rather was — how shall I say it — always an *unlikely* sort. Now, it appears he has at last been rendered *impossible.*"

That rattled me, and gave Thibodeaux a brief advantage, which he pressed. He produced a small pistol from inside his tidy white lab coat. He leveled it at my mid-section. I tensed, but didn't move. Nearly twenty feet separated us. Could I close the distance before he nailed me?

I had to keep him talking. Buy some time. "Why, Thibodeaux? You've always had more class than this. First you wreck Captain Paradox's lab. Then, you threaten me with a pistol. It's not your style."

Thibodeaux marginally lowered the gun. I heaved an inner sigh of relief that I hoped he wouldn't notice. I knew that villains can never refrain from talking about themselves, or resist describing the minutiae of their plans for world domination.

Thibodeaux chuckled almost benevolently. "There are a great many, myself included," he said, "who would happily kill both you and Captain Paradox to obtain his most puissant weapon: the Probability Key."

Shit!

* * *

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"You're *thirty*, Craig," Fiona had said over a mouthful of grape leaf-wrapped dolma. "It's silly for you to still be running all over the country to write stories about this superannuated Saturday matinee hero and his teen sidekick."

I tried to pat her hand, but she pulled it away. "It's important work," I said lamely, ending in a shrug while she chewed very slowly and glowered at me.

Important work? Maybe. Improbable work? Certainly. It was improbable that news editors continued to pay such good money for stories about the Supers years after they had become commonplace. I sometimes wondered if that's as improbable as having a fiancée who doesn't recognize you just because you happen to be wearing tights and a domino mask.

"It's not real life, Craig," she said. Her eyes were getting very blue and moist. "Real life is settling down, getting married. Kids, maybe. A career with some predictability. Something that doesn't involve hanging upside-down from helicopter runners, or nearly getting sacrificed to some volcano god for the sake of a few exclusive photos."

I didn't have an answer for her. And I couldn't tell her the *real* truth. Captain Paradox needed me. The *universe* needed me.

GETTING SHOT might have been a less painful option than the one I chose. But instead of absorbing the bullet, I concentrated with every erg of power at my disposal on Thibodeaux's gun-hand. With a cry, the stick-thin old man dropped the gun to the wreckage-strewn lab floor. He clutched his useless right hand, which now resembled a sea lion's flipper, in his other hand.

Altering probabilities to the extent of actually changing the shape of an adversary's body had always put a huge strain on me. Besides being contrary to the Captain's overly solicitous sense of heroic ethics. Still, it wasn't something I'd do lightly, at least under normal circumstances. Captain Paradox had always cast a long, moderating shadow across my more volcanic impulses.

But now I stood face to face with the man who in all likelihood had just killed Captain Paradox. I walked over to Thibodeaux, trying not to weave as I moved. I summoned all my remaining strength and grasped

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the old man by his collar, dragging him to his feet.

"I ought to finish you right now for what you've done to Captain Paradox," I hissed. How many times had Captain Paradox sagaciously talked me down from this precipice?

Thaddeus Thibodeaux only laughed, but with an incongruously beneficent tone. He dropped his left hand into his coat pocket. I grabbed his wrist, felt the bones creak and grind like dry kindling. Something was in his pocket, a weapon perhaps, and I wanted to see it. I released his wrist and pulled the object from the depths of his jacket, letting Thibodeaux crumple to the lab floor.

It was a foot-long, notched metal rod, and it gleamed an unnaturally bright silver. It should have weighed ten pounds or more, but it had virtually no heft at all. I remembered some of Captain Paradox's pedantic descriptions of the thing's inner workings: super-light wafers, separated by a mere hydrogen atom's width. Quantum effects. My eyes widened behind the opaque white eye-slits of the domino mask. An errant wind from outside the ruined ceiling made my cape rustle and whisper around my knees.

I'd never held the thing in my hands before, or even seen it up close. But I knew it had to be Captain Paradox's Probability Key.

Thibodeaux sneered up at me from the floor. But his face didn't bear quite the same hatred I remembered from our every other encounter. From the time I'd first seen Thibodeaux's wrinkled death's head expression, it had imprinted itself on me as the very definition of evil.

I'd been a little kid back then. Was it pity I saw now in his eyes, rather than malice?

"You jock-strapped idiots," he said, shaking his head. "Fools wearing your underwear outside your pants. Do you think this is the way the world is really supposed to be? Endless, inconclusive fights between costumed heroes and costumed villains?

"Before the Great Whoops, the world made sense. A prosaic, dull sort of sense, but the universe at least had a kind of dignity. Little triumphs counted for something. Gods in spandex couldn't move planets from their orbits on a whim."

I swallowed, but my throat felt like a gravel road. I remembered when the world made sense, too. And I remembered being a kid. A misfit teen

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who saw in the newly changed post-Whoops world a way out. A kid for whom saving the world with Captain Paradox became both a divine calling and a source of entertainment that not even the very best comic books and video games could provide.

"You were there beside Paradox when the Whoops happened, weren't you?" Thibodeaux said. "He was your uncle, and your late mother had placed you in his care."

I blanched. How did he know this? When had he had time to raid the Captain's private files? Before Captain Paradox had *become* Captain Paradox, back when he was simply Dr. Harold Harwood, he had led a research project at the Lawrence Livermore Lab in Northern California. Uncle Harry had been studying the quantum foam that underlies the universe itself. He'd described the quantum foam as "the mattress-pad upon which the fitted sheets and blankets of reality are stretched." Whatever, I had thought at the time. All I remembered of the project was a lot of uninteresting math and a really cool-looking particle-accelerator ring at the lab.

And, of course, I remembered being in that lab on the day an O-ring blew and a batch of quantum foam accidentally got into the ground water, forever altering the laws of probability and the fundamental physics of the universe. The Supers were born that day. The good ones and the bad ones both.

"Your uncle Harry wasn't a very responsible guardian," continued Thibodeaux. "The so-called 'Great Whoops' was no accident. Dr. Harwood knew perfectly well what he was doing. He was rewriting the rules of the universe to make it more to his liking. He wanted a world where everything made sense in terms of black and white. Heroes and villains. What could be more simple?

"But he couldn't get it quite right on that first attempt. The comic-book world he'd dreamed of was too complex. Too many variables. Too many loose cannons to lash down, too many Supers who refused to behave themselves. He needed to make another, more careful attempt at omnipotence."

I turned the silver key over and over in my hands. It seemed to twist in my grasp, as though it contained restless energies that wouldn't sit still for long.

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"Look well at the Key, Quantum Boy," Thibodeaux said, a sneer creeping into his voice as he uttered the name. Or was that just me? "And think about it. *You* hold the key to all Probability now. You, not Captain Paradox. You can live in Paradox's fantasy, or you can recast the universe into something saner. The decision is yours."

Decisions. I knew I didn't want to face any momentous decisions. At least not without asking the Captain for some guidance. If only he hadn't been reduced to a handful of sugar-cubes, I maundered. I felt like a weakling for thinking that, and hated myself for it.

Then a deep, familiar voice boomed from behind me.

"Good work, Quantum Boy. I see you've recovered the Probability Key. And that Thibodeaux has yet to corrupt its energies. Get ready, Quantum Boy."

Captain Paradox stood whole, inexplicably restored. He was a few meters from where he had apparently fallen, and now showed no signs of the odd crystallization effect. Paradox's red and yellow uniform was immaculate, scarcely wrinkling even at the bending places. His eyes twinkled beneath his ocher-colored cowl and his cape tossed and swirled, even though there was very little wind coming down from the hole in the ceiling. It was as though all reality had shifted itself, just for me.

Oh, I thought, pondering Thibodeaux's useless right arm and the nearly weightless, pulsating metal I held in my hand.

"Nuts!" hissed Thaddeus Thibodeaux. His trademark.

I ignored him, and noticed that my jaw was hanging slackly. Nothing connected with my adventures with Captain Paradox ought to surprise me, I thought.

"'Get Ready'?" I asked.

"Prepare to focus your probability-altering abilities through the Key. This will realign all Probability, as we've discussed. It looks like your powers have already triggered the Key's energies. Can you feel it powering up?"

I could, and nodded.

"Once the Key is completely activated," said Captain Paradox, "we'll only have one chance at this, you know."

I nodded mutely. I was Quantum Boy, after all. *He* was Captain Paradox. The legend, the square-jawed hero who always spoke in those quaint "as I'm sure you're already aware, professor" clichés.

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"Sure, Captain Paradox," I said, grasping the slender metal stick in hands that felt slick and clammy inside the lime-colored gloves. My eyes screwed themselves tightly shut behind the domino mask. I tried to concentrate on the Probability Key, on what I knew it could do. On Captain Paradox's careful lessons.

I opened my eyes to see Captain Paradox standing over Thibodeaux. The white lab coat hung on the wretched little man like a becalmed sail.

"There are too many Supers who take no responsibility for their abilities," said Paradox. He was using his now world-famous Lecturing Voice. "Too many who, like you, would run roughshod over the helpless billions. The Great Origin has given the world a few very powerful men and women who seek only justice. But it has also unleashed incalculable evil and destruction."

The Captain had never permitted me to use the term "Great Whoops" in his presence. *Supers are a gift from Fate, not an accident to be regretted,* he had told me on several occasions.

The metal rod began to vibrate in my hand. It grew warm. I continued to concentrate, with difficulty.

The Captain continued to lecture. He couldn't help himself.

"Now, we can undo the evils wrought by misguided meta-humans," Captain Paradox said. "The Probability Key can adjust the Great Origin very slightly. It can turn the tide. It can increase the heroes-to-villains ratio."

Thibodeaux smiled grimly up at the hero towering over him. "Why stop there?" he asked, chuckling. "Why not simply redirect the quantum foam to write us over completely? Why not fill the world *entirely* with spandex-clad do-gooders?"

Captain Paradox began stroking his smooth bridge-abutment of a chin as though actually considering this. Absurdly, I wondered how the woman in the flower-print dress, or the man who'd given me the finger this morning, would look in primary-colored spandex, flying across the Portland skyline.

The rod tried to wrench itself out of my grip. I continued to concentrate on holding on to it, but more unbidden, distracting images appeared before me.

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I imagined myself sixty years old. Captain Paradox still calls me Quantum Boy.

I saw Fiona, her pretty features sullied by a frown. She scolding me for being an irresponsible Peter Pan. Me deserving it. Where was she going to fit in inside the juvenile paradise Paradox must be envisioning at this moment?

Where was *I* going to fit in?

I could barely hold onto the Probability Key anymore. I grasped at it with two hands, both of which were becoming numb with the strain. I concentrated on holding on. The sound of thunder surrounded me, centering on the slender cylinder in my hands.

Captain Paradox's voice sliced through the other distractions. "The power's got to be released, boy! We've only one shot at this! You know what to do! Make a wish, boy! Make a wish!"

"Be careful what you wish for," I thought I heard Thibodeaux rasp. But I couldn't be sure.

I closed my eyes, wished hard, and let go of the rod. I heard a thunderclap and then a

tinkling sound as though something fragile had been smashed with great force into a linoleum floor.

Something had. The pink earthenware coffee cup had launched like a projectile from my soap-slicked hands right onto the kitchen floor.

"Goddammit," I said. That had been my favorite coffee cup. I concentrated on the moist shards on the floor for a long moment, willing them to reassemble.

Nothing. I smiled. I tossed the shards into the trash and rinsed off two other coffee mugs and Fiona's fancy doo-hickey that made such wonderfully neat, even slices of cheese. The toast popped and the kettle began to whistle. Quiet feet padded into the kitchen, approaching me from behind. Gentle hands encircled my waist.

"Craig!" Fiona said. "You're making me breakfast?"

I smiled over my shoulder at her. "You sound surprised."

"You *never* make me breakfast. Besides, you said you had to answer a call. A big story. Maybe a Pulitzer." She made a face when she said "Pulitzer," one of my wearisome, oft-repeated bullshit-words.

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"I decided not to take the call," I said. "I think I'm going to go look for a job, instead. Or maybe a few nice, safe freelance writing projects I can tackle at home."

Fiona's eyes were bigger than the saucers I set on the kitchen table. She didn't speak as I opened the drapes over the kitchen sink and opened the window, letting the morning in. The gauzy curtains billowed gently in the breeze, like Captain Paradox's cape.

Ping!

I noticed then that my beeper was on the kitchen table. Had I wished it there? I picked it up and excused myself to the bathroom while Fiona poured the coffee.

"Quantum Boy!" crackled Captain Paradox's voice, echoing very faintly. "Thibodeaux must have used the Probability Key against us somehow. Everything is dark. I don't know where I am..."

I wasn't enjoying this. Captain Paradox should sound strong. Confident. This was the voice of a lost waif. I realized then that to Captain Paradox, super-heroing had become everything. It had been his entire world. In a world without Supers, how would he survive?

"Um, I think something's gone wrong with the Key," I said. I probably didn't sound very convincing.

"It's Thibodeaux," Captain Paradox said, almost too faintly to hear. "Find him, Quantum Boy. Find him!"

I grimaced, and flicked the beeper off. Quantum Boy. Shit.

I'll find him all right.

I returned to the kitchen table and sat down beside Fiona. She smiled at me over the top of her coffee cup.

"Let's get married," she said.

I raised an eyebrow, then said, "Okay." My lips started to curl into what felt like a smile.

I sipped my coffee and munched a piece of toast while flipping through the telephone directory I'd propped on my knee. I scanned the "Th" section in the white pages.

"If we're going to get married, we ought to think about the finances," I said.

"Who are you looking up?"

Ah, there it is. Thibodeaux, Thaddeus.

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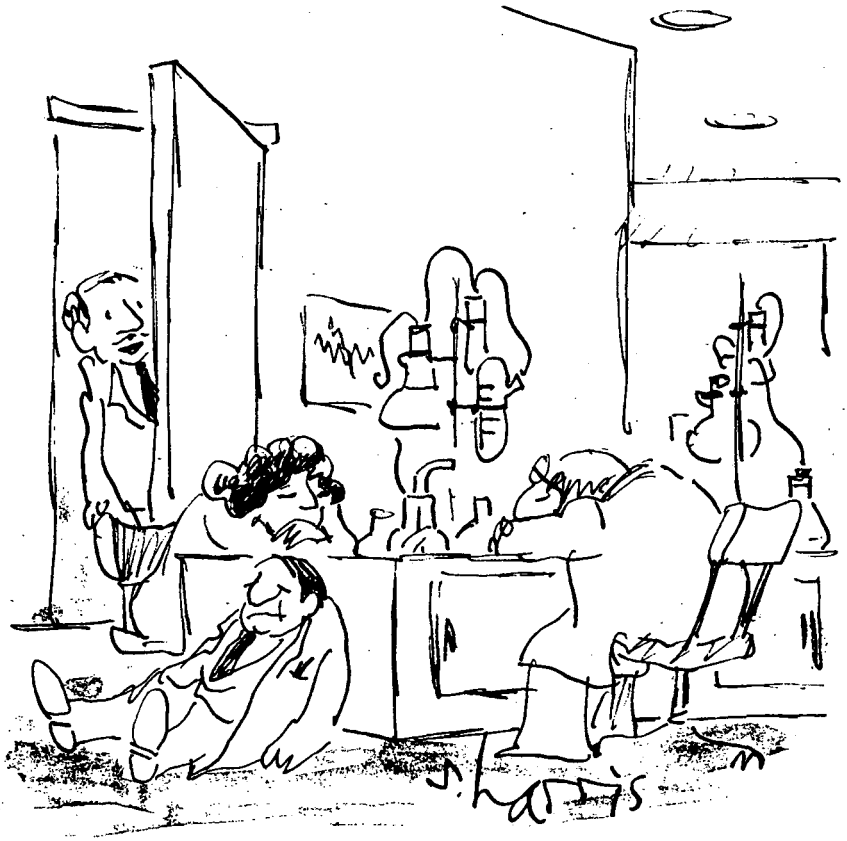
"Just an old colleague," I said. "I'll bet money he's looking for a new line of work right about now, too."

Portrait of a Paradox: The Life and Times of Dr. Harold Harwood. I already had the title down. I figured I could use plenty of primary sources, like Thibodeaux. Maybe even a co-biographer. Yeah, a biography. Supers would be like dinosaurs: People would enjoy reading about them a lot more than they would being threatened by them. I had a feeling that once everybody understood that the Supers were safely dead, confined now to the four-color pages where they belonged, the book could sell millions.

I reached for the telephone.



"How's the new insomnia pill going?"

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

THE SCIENCE OF INVISIBILITY

Our science column returns with two new columnists, who will periodically be complementing Dr. Benford (who's due back next month). Most of you know Pat Murphy from her award-winning fiction; what you may not know is that Pat has worked for years at the Exploratorium, a wonderful hands-on science museum in San Francisco. Paul Doherty is a physicist with a Ph.D. from MIT who also works at the Exploratorium, in addition to teaching and writing many science activity books. Together they'll be bringing us a new look at the sciences (including this month's view of things not seen). — Ed.

ONE HUNDRED years ago (1897), H. G. Wells created the first stealth human being: the invisible man. Wells combined science and fiction to craft a novel exploring the possibilities and drawbacks of becoming an invisible person. At about the same time, J. J. Thompson discovered the electron. That discovery led to our modern theory of the interactions of light and matter, quantum electrodynamics, which allows us to understand what would be actually needed to achieve invisibility.

Invisibility is such a handy device — in both science fiction and fantasy. Its use has ranged from Wells's scientific treatment to the ever-so-useful magic ring or cloak of invisibility. On this anniversary, we thought we'd take a look at the science of invisibility, including (in true Exploratorium fashion) a few experiments you can try at home.

In *The Invisible Man*, Wells provides a basic explanation of the science. (He got it right, too — which isn't surprising since Wells studied science and later became a science teacher.) The invisible man of Wells's novel was a medical student who

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took up the study of physics and went mad. (Pat has suggested that there may be a connection between these two events; Paul, a physicist, denies it.) In a discussion with another physician, Wells's invisible man sums up what makes something visible — and therefore what you must change to become invisible. In his words, "Visibility depends on the action of the visible bodies on light. Either a body absorbs light, or it reflects or refracts it, or it does all three. If it neither reflects nor refracts nor absorbs light, it cannot of itself be visible."

A LOVELY SHADE OF ULTRAVIOLET

Before we talk about what you can't see, you need to understand exactly what it is that you can see. Bob Miller, an artist who has built a number of Exploratorium exhibits, says, "You see light. It's the only thing you can see."

Bob's quite right. You see the world because some of the light that's bouncing off the stuff around you gets into your eyes. Your eyes bend that light to focus an image on your retina. The light-sensitive cells of the retina process that image, converting it into patterns of electrical impulses that your brain processes, and *voilà* — you see the world.

What you see depends on how the light that gets into your eyes has been affected by the stuff it has encountered before it got into your eyes. The stuff we call visible light is a tiny slice of the spectrum of electromagnetic waves — which includes radio waves, x-rays, gamma rays, and ultraviolet light. Different colors of light are electromagnetic waves of different wavelengths. Your eyes can detect electromagnetic waves ranging from 700 nanometers (red) to 400 nanometers (violet). If you think of the electromagnetic spectrum as a piano keyboard, visible light is equivalent to about an octave. Beyond that range, there are electromagnetic waves that you can't see — essentially, colors that are invisible to you. (Which is why Pat's favorite color is ultraviolet. It's a perfectly legitimate color, just beyond the range of human vision.)

Electromagnetic waves are exquisitely sensitive to the presence of electrons in matter. Electrons are charged particles, and electromagnetic waves push on charges, making electrons oscillate. Depending on how its electrons react to this push, matter can absorb light, reflect light, or bend or refract light.

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These interactions with light are what make objects visible.

An object absorbs light if its electrons oscillate in response to the light and transform light energy into other forms, such as heat energy or chemical energy. Most objects absorb at least some visible light. An object's color depends on what frequencies of visible light it absorbs. Grass looks green, for example, because chlorophyll absorbs red and blue light and reflects the left-over green light to your eyes. Blood looks red because hemoglobin absorbs blue and green light and reflects red light. Objects that absorb all colors look black or gray and become visible against the bright or colored objects behind them, just as the coal sack nebula appears black against the brighter Milky Way behind it.

To become invisible in Wells's tale, the would-be invisible man had to deal with biological pigments, compounds that absorb light. The main pigments in the human body are hemoglobin and melanin. Since the invisible man was an albino and his body produced no melanin, his job was easier. He just had to deal with the hemoglobin, the compound in blood that absorbs oxygen. So he discovers a chemical that bleached hemoglobin, rendering it colorless, while allowing it to retain its oxygen transporting function.

This is one spot in the story where physicists and chemists must suspend their disbelief: No such chemical is known even today. It would be more likely to find a colorless chemical to replace the oxygen-carrying hemoglobin in the blood than to bleach hemoglobin and have it retain its function. And of course, there are practical considerations: The invisible man could have stopped here and made a fortune with a commercial cleaning product that removes blood stains instantly.

REFLECTING ON LIGHT

Eliminating absorption of light is just the first step toward becoming invisible. Next, the invisible man needed to eliminate reflection and refraction.

So let's consider reflection, first. Some objects like water or glass absorb so little light that they are pretty much clear. Not completely clear — if you look at a pane of window glass through one of its edges it appears green because iron oxide impurities in the glass are absorbing some light — but close enough. Yet you can see a clear

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glass window because light reflects from its surface.

Other forms of reflection make other objects visible. Clouds and snowbanks look white because the surfaces of water drops and ice crystals scatter light. The skin of an albino looks white because the clear skin proteins scatter light. Blue jay feathers, the tail of a blue-tailed gecko and Paul Newman's eyes are all blue — but none of these things contain blue pigment. In all of them, tiny particles scatter more blue light than red.

Light can reflect from the surface of a clear material. The light that doesn't reflect shines through the material — but that doesn't mean it's unaffected by the material. When light shines through a lens, through a glass filled with water, through a fishbowl, the light refracts or bends, distorting the view and revealing that something's in the way.

So to be completely invisible, you need to eliminate reflection and refraction — and that brings us to the speed of light. Light reflects and bends because it changes speed abruptly at the surface of the clear object.

Yeah, yeah — we know. You've been told that light always travels at the same speed. Well, that's more or less true. As long as nothing's in the way, light cruises along at 186,000 miles per second, the speed of light in a vacuum. But when waves of light pass the atoms in a transparent material, they are delayed just a bit. It is as if each atom absorbs a little bit of the wave energy and then releases it with a slight delay. That delay means that the speed of light is slower through a clear material than the speed in a vacuum.

The re-emitted light waves spread out in a circle around each atom. All of those circles of re-emitted light add together to make a beam of light. When light enters a surface at an angle all the little re-mitted circles of light add up to make the direction of the light change — and the light bends or refracts.

How much light slows down when it shines through a material, depends on the material. When physicists are talking about the speed of light in a particular material, they talk about the index of refraction — the ratio of the speed of light in a vacuum to the speed of light in a material. In window glass, for instance, the index of refraction is 1.5. That means the speed of light in glass is 2/3 of the speed in a vacuum. Since the index of refraction is a ratio of two speeds, it's a number without units.

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Now it's easy to make a glass rod disappear by putting it in a liquid with an identical index of refraction. At the Exploratorium, there's an exhibit where you can dip a bundle of seven glass rods into a clear fluid. Once immersed, six of the rods become invisible; the seventh remains visible. The disappearing glass in this exhibit is clear pyrex glass. In air, the six pyrex rods are visible because light reflects from the surface of the glass and bends as it enters and leaves the glass. However, the mixture of mineral oils in which the rods are immersed exactly matches the index of refraction of pyrex — so the rods become invisible. The seventh rod is made from flint glass, which has a different index of refraction — and therefore remains visible.

If you feel like it, you can duplicate this experiment at home.

Making a glass rod disappear in liquid is much easier than making a person — even a transparent person — disappear in air. The index of refraction of the human body is greater than 1.3 and the index of refraction for air is 1.003. This is a huge difference.

In *The Invisible Man*, Wells overcomes this in the story with another bit of wild fiction that requires physicists to take a deep breath and work hard to suspend their disbelief. The invisible man discovers an "ethereal vibration" which he compares to a roentgen ray (now called an x-ray). This ray reduces the index of refraction of body tissues until they are close to that of air.

THE PROBLEMS OF BEING INVISIBLE

Unfortunately, invisibility comes with a few problems. If the invisible man were truly invisible, he would also be blind. For the invisible man (or anyone else) to see, the retinas of the eyes must absorb light and convert it into nerve impulses. If the retinas are absorbing light, they would show up as dark patches. If they aren't absorbing light, the invisible man would be blind. Perhaps that's one reason invisible men are so dangerous — you can't see them to get out of their way and they can't see you to stay out of yours.

Of course, Wells's invisible man matched his index of refraction to air at a certain temperature. When air changes temperature, its index of refraction changes. That's why stars twinkle (refraction through layers of air at different temperature) and mirages appear on

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desert roads (light bending up from the layer of hot air just above the hot asphalt). So if Wells's character became invisible on a hot summer day, he wouldn't be quite so invisible in the chill of winter. He'd be visible in the same way that the hot air rising from a vent on a cold day is visible.

Of course, if you want to be a well-dressed invisible person, you need to make your clothes invisible too. In Wells's book, the invisible man's equipment is destroyed before he can make any invisible clothes. To take advantage of his invisibility he must run naked through the English countryside. For a while, people hear coughing sounds coming from an invisible man with a cold. He also leaves footprints in the snow.

OTHER WAYS TO BECOME INVISIBLE

Wells's invisible man became invisible by eliminating his effect on light. You could also become invisible by precisely matching your background, like the alien in the movie *Predator*. As near as we can figure, the Predator must detect the light coming toward its body on one side and match that pattern of light precisely on its other side.

On Earth, chameleons, flounders, and octopi use a variation on this technique. These animals change color by changing the distribution of a dark pigment in special branched cells known as chromatophores. The pigment can be concentrated in the center of the cell, letting the animal's other colors show. Or the pigment can spread out into the branches of the cell, covering a wide area and causing the reptile's skin to darken. The color change is stimulated by what the animal sees around it.

These animals tend to match the colors of nearby surfaces. It would be a lot tougher to match the light coming from more distant sources.

All in all, we've decided that perhaps the best solution in the world of science fiction was used by Lamont Cranston, the Shadow. While traveling in the Orient, he learned to "cloud men's minds." (We assume, of course, he could cloud women's minds too, though that wasn't explicitly stated.) So instead of interfering with the interactions between light and matter, the Shadow opted to mess with perception in the human brain. As anyone who has experimented with optical illusions can tell you, that's a much easier task.

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EXPERIMENTS IN INVISIBILITY

You can perform a few simple experiments in invisibility in the comfort of your own lab — or kitchen.

Disappearing Glass

Get yourself some pyrex glass — such as a measuring cup, an oven-safe glass baking dish, or, if you've got access to a chemistry lab, a stirring stick.

Dunk the pyrex in Wesson Oil™ and it will become very hard to see. You can make it vanish completely by duplicating the Exploratorium's mixture of mineral oils. Get some heavy mineral oil and some light mineral oil at the drugstore. Put some heavy mineral oil in a clear glass and put your pyrex into the oil. Add light mineral oil, stirring frequently, until the pyrex vanishes.

Don Rathjen, a local science teacher, uses the disappearance of pyrex glass to wow his classes. Don takes a pyrex test tube, wraps it in a protective cloth, smashes it into pieces with a hammer. The shards are clearly visible in air. Don pours the pieces into a beaker of transparent oil. He then reaches into the oil with a pair of tongs and pulls out a completely unbroken test tube! (He had, of course, put the whole test tube in the oil earlier.)

You can experiment to see what other clear materials vanish in Wesson Oil™ or your mixture of mineral oils. We have found that simple plastic magnifiers sold to children as Bug Boxes vanish in Wesson Oil™. If you make any interesting discoveries, let us know at pauld@exploratorium.edu.

Solid Water

You can also experiment with white crystals of "superabsorbent polymer," available at many garden centers. These crystals absorb hundreds of times their own weight in water and are meant to be added to soil to give it the ability to hold water.

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When you place these polymer crystals into clean water, they swell up and become invisible. Pull them out of the water and they look like lumps of jelly. Lower them back into the water and they vanish. They vanish because they contain so much water that their index of refraction matches that of water.

Tie a noose made of sewing thread around one of these water swollen lumps and lower it into the water. Suddenly you have lassoed a bit of water. Even better, you can lift your chunk of water out of the surface of the water. ☆

LOUIS PASTEUR'S SECRET PROJECT...
Now I'll corner the market with these chocolate, strawberry and vanilla Pasteurized milkshakes!
J. HARRIS

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Mark Bourne lives in Portland, Oregon, where he is working on his first novel in between writing planetarium shows and doing a few projects for television. His short fiction has appeared in such anthologies as Alternate Tyrants, Full Spectrum 5, *and* Chicks in Chainmail. *Here he brings us a tale of faiths that differ strongly in terms of whose word is The Word.*

Mustard Seed

By Mark Bourne

DONNELLY'S HAND ROSE high, hoisting the Bible like a trophy. Her forehead furrowed, and her voice rose with practiced inflection that echoed among the rafters and stained-glass windows. Her rhythms and cadences crested and rolled in waves, well rehearsed after years of roadside revivals in forgotten Southern towns. *Thank you, Lord, for making me your instrument for one more day.*

"Men of Earth are cavorting with creatures who never read the Gospel — "

She cast her gaze across her beloved flock.

"Who never heard the Word of God — "

They must hear her words if they were to be saved.

"Who never felt the guiding hand of our Savior — "

She was their lamp in the darkness brought from the stars, ever since those first faint signals were heard by the Farside Lunar Receiver. And those first vessels descended from the clouds.

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"Who have no souls, for the Kingdom of Heaven was prepared by Jesus for Man alone."

Like a lighthouse on a rocky shore, she gazed down upon her congregation. A subconscious clock measured the dramatic pause, then her voice modulated to a preordained pitch. "We walk not with angels, but with *aliens* blind to Man's *true* gift to God's firmament — our Savior Jesus Christ!" She thrust the Bible before her like a shield. "*Jesus* said..." She paused to catch the eyes of those before her; it was an easy haul. "*Jesus* said, 'No one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven but by *me*'!" She clenched her eyes shut and listened.

There had been a time, years ago, when the stained glass would have rattled with "Amen!" and "Hallelujah!" ringing throughout the sanctuary. And on Easter and Christmas Sundays (when extra fold-out chairs were brought in from the Fellowship Hall) the room had been so filled with upraised voices that the walls might have burst open and flooded the world with the Lord's holy praises.

Today, though, Donnelly heard the central heating clunk on. Far away bells in the courthouse clock chimed the hour. Old Ralph Hardin in the rear pews needed a Kleenex. No more than twenty souls here today. Fewer than last week.

She opened her eyes, lowered the Bible to the pulpit. Her brow lost its furrows, but not the thin lines like dried-up river beds. Her voice was almost inaudible over the heating system.

"Don't forget next Sunday's Christmas Eve candle-lighting service. Bring your friends." She despised the dead weight of defeat in her voice. "That's all." There was no organist to play the benediction and postlude.

She turned away, loosened her collar, and rubbed her eyes, keeping them closed longer than she really needed to. The sounds of shuffling coats and snuffling noses rose behind her. The exit door in the rear foyer groaned on its arthritic joints, and December's gray chill slid down out of the Ozarks and brushed the back of her neck. Winter's teeth nipped at Reverend Ardith Donnelly of the Central Presbyterian Church of Harper, Missouri.

She turned back to her pulpit to gather up the sermon. Gerald Morris was peering up from the floor below. The chicken farmer clutched his

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overcoat against his belly and stared at her with eyes that rarely blinked; two eggs pressed into a moist dough face.

"Revern' Donnelly?" His voice, like his brown suit jacket, was thin and faded.

"Yes, Gerald, what can I do for you?"

"M'mama wants to know when you're comin' out to the nursin' home agin. She says your services alwiz brighten her day. She says so alla time. She's real sick, and the doctors, they don't know how long...." His voice thinned away to nothing.

She exhaled, then smiled. "The Lord's work keeps me busy all over, but He and I will be back at the home real soon. Tell your mama to keep a lookout for us."

He grinned. "Bless you, Revern' Donnelly. Jeannie and me'll have you over to the house for supper real soon. Thas a promise."

"Much obliged, Gerald." She smiled warmly.

"Revern' Donnelly?" He looked away from her gaze. "Jimmy Don Ledbetter says he saw two of them Seekers in St. Louis last week. He says they talked with just ever'body about how glad they was Earth was joining the Union. Then one of them helped Roy Capehart — you know, the taxidermist? — fly through the air. Without wings or *nothin'*! It was its Gift, it said. Then another'n made colors in the air and music came from the pictures they made. Said *we* could maybe do it someday. Ever'one had just the best time! Isn't that wonderful?"

Donnelly looked down at him. "Gerald, doesn't the Bible tell us that God gave Man dominion over all beasts through Brother Adam?"

His eyes narrowed, but never blinked. "Well, I s'pose so."

"And what does the Bible say about Satan tempting Jesus with miracles?"

He looked at his hands kneading his overcoat. "Jimmy Don Ledbetter says — "

Donnelly shut her eyes. "Gerald. There are new temptations out there among the stars. The Seekers know neither Christ nor salvation, even though all you need is the faith of a mustard seed." She replayed an old memory: a sanctuary filled with multitudes in her spiritual hug. She had been a pilgrim, a searcher for God's wisdom, sharing what she found with others. She had been young and strong of voice. And of spirit.

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The memory faded, leaving only the floaters drifting across the insides of her eyelids. "Only God knows what is in their hearts," she said quietly. She opened her eyes. "You tell Jimmy Don — "

But he was on his way toward the exit, shrugging on his overcoat. The door whimpered shut behind him.

She knew as much about the Seekers as anyone else in these parts. Twelve years now after First Contact, dozens of assorted aliens — "extrasolar emissaries" — were on Earth, mostly in big cities like New York and Moscow, London and Tokyo, Beijing and Bombay. Their immense ships had followed their transmissions, offering humanity membership in a galactic trade Union that was opening new markets in the outer galactic reaches. The world was still knocked cock-eyed by it all. The cultural elite were declaring it the greatest event in human history. A new age on Earth. Peace and prosperity. Heaven on Earth.

But no heavenly trumpet had sounded. Just those first signals from out of Sagittarius, heard only by electronic ears. No salvation had come, for it arrived not on angelic wings and a fiery throne, but in huge vessels orbiting Earth and landers descending from the clouds, even in non-Christian lands. And more were arriving all the time.

She felt betrayed, but she wasn't sure by whom. She only knew that the invasion was complete. Wal-Mart was selling Seeker-inspired toys for Christmas. For *Christmas*! Hallmark's biggest sellers were miniature spaceships hanging from Christmas trees across the land — "collect the whole set!" Earth would never again know a cosmos in which Man was adrift and alone. The fruit from the Tree of Knowledge had tasted sweet.

Donnelly turned her back again, stuffing the morning's text into a dog-eared file folder. This was the third go-round for this sermon. And the last.

The rear door complained and a cold breeze scraped across the back of Donnelly's neck. She sighed, but did not turn around. "Be right with you," she called. She listened for footsteps on the floorboards. Instead, she heard glass tinkling, the sound a crystal chandelier makes when given a gentle swing. She turned. The room was empty.

"Who's there? Come out!" The tinkling stopped abruptly, as if someone muffled all the crystal droplets at once.

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At the far end of the aisle, a knobby spike of colored glass reached out from behind a pew. Five faceted fingers grew at its tip and waved. To the tinkling of tiny bells, a spun-glass sculpture walked into the aisle.

Donnelly's brain struggled to find analogies. A leafless bush in winter, crafted by a glassblower. Branches and twigs of fine crystal were shot through with blues and reds and golds flowing through icy veins. They reached up from a nest of dew-dipped spider webs where indefinable hues came and went, blending, shifting, sparkling in the sunlight slanting through the colored windows.

Donnelly stared across the room at the...the *thing*. A sour taste crawled up onto her tongue.

"I must ask you to leave," she said, struggling to keep the surprise and disgust out of her voice. "Keep your Satan-sent ways out of God's house."

The creature quivered. Two translucent twigs reached down into the glittering webs. They reappeared and held aloft a meaty ovoid sac. The bladder wriggled wetly, split open across the middle, and spoke to Reverend Donnelly.

"Hello. Pardon me, please," it said in a dead-on Missouri accent. "I wish to talk with God." The fragile-looking thing scuttled up the aisle on glassy insect legs, bringing the sound of windchimes in the rain.

Standing there with it approaching her, Donnelly felt a familiar bitterness burn in her chest.

The creature reached the steps at the base of the pulpit. Diamond glints danced across its surfaces. It raised the sac toward Donnelly's face. The Talker symbiote's humanform lips smacked open, flashing straight white teeth. "Please," the translator said. "Teach me to talk with God."

Donnelly wanted to spit. "God listens to our prayers. Can *you* pray?" She put as much venom into her voice as a good Christian could muster.

"I have practiced the prayer rituals of six hundred forty-four worlds," said the translator. As it spoke, lights like golden fireflies chased through its master's branches. "I have perceived no response."

"What can *you* know of God?"

"I have worshipped the deities of many cultures, often at the cost of emotional or physical pain. Occasionally, enlightenment was gained. But none offered what I desired."

"Why come to me?"

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"I enjoy the quiet places of your world. Trees. I enjoy trees. I was strolling nearby and recognized the religious symbol at the summit of this building. I meditated, then chose to seek out the religious leader here. That, I perceive, is you. Your species has developed religious expression with great complexity and ritual. Humans have many god-forms. Perhaps one has the answer I seek. Perhaps you do."

The thing tweaked Donnelly's curiosity. The Talker's perfect human voice softened its master's alien appearance. "What do you seek?" she asked.

The alien sparkled and its Talker took in a gulp of air. "I am old for my kind. And an aberration. As a whole, my people dislike travel. We are —" the translator's lips curled upward in a wry smile, " — home-bodies. *I*, however, enjoy the company of other species and have lived for centuries in many cultures on many worlds. I have experienced...*marvels* that cannot be spoken of in your language, which has neither words nor concepts to describe them."

The Talker frowned for its master. "I have reached the limits of life-prolongation techniques useful to my species, and now approach the end of my biological processes. Once I believed that I had experienced the known universe to its fullest. But the long journey to this galactic arm revealed many more...*wonders* beyond my experience. Oh, if only I could *share* them with you! But your language cannot convey —" Flecks of light whirled, changing their hue. "You have no —" The translator's rubbery features mimicked human frustration well. "And still there are uncountable galaxies beyond this one. I fear that I will not live to experience all..." The sentence withered away.

It stood silent for slow seconds, then climbed the three steps to Donnelly's side. Crystalline arms lifted the Talker closer. Its voice was edged with hope and desperation. "I wish to never die."

Donnelly studied the tiny fires and woven geometries of the alien. This *creature* hoped for the salvation promised by the Son of Man. Could it even have an immortal soul? Would God create mind without soul? These beings sailed the stars long before Eve sealed Adam's fate. What sins did they know, and were now bringing to Earth?

Donnelly remembered the hot smells of musty tent cloth and road dust, of sweating sinners who wept at her feet and begged for salvation.

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She had saved souls by the dozens at each town and farm. Now, perhaps, a greater flock was being offered.

With proper guidance, this reborn creature and its gifted symbiote could preach the Word in churches, in *cathedrals* throughout the world. Millions would travel far to hear an alien proclaim God's message. And not just on Earth. Imagine the Good News spreading throughout the heavens! A million worlds cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. With this disciple at her side, Reverend Ardith Donnelly could take up the sword and see to it that Christ died for the sins of a galaxy.

This must be her true calling, the reason God guided the Seekers' ships out of the darkness to Earth, where the light of Christianity could dim a million suns. The Lord led this poor emissary to Donnelly's pulpit, to the one *true* faith, to the feet of Christ's own lighthouse. If Donnelly's Earthly flock chose to stray from the path of righteousness, well then she and the Lord would carve a new path that spread for light-years in all directions. *Thank you, God. Thank you, dear Jesus.*

She smiled down at the alien. Her voice was robed in maternal patience.

"Eternal life is offered *only* to believers in Christ." She opened the Book of Matthew. "I'd like to share with you — "

She felt as though her skull had vanished and warm water flowed over her brain —

— She is a tremendous crystal bathing in cold acid pools beneath the spectrum-flecked radiance of a star cluster. She sees without eyes and feels without flesh, and she sings without sound in perfect harmony with ten billion others like herself on a hundred worlds. She sings of birth, of hunger and mystery, and of the deepest yearning she has ever known...

— She leaps, joyously laughing, from a cliff of black glass into an ocean lit by a bloated red giant sun. The hot sea engulfs her, and the Joy rushes like fire across her front fins, down her long spine, and into her hindbrain. Broadcasting exaltation to all who listen, she plunges deeper into the First Mother Who Gave Us Life...

— Buoyant, balloonish, she floats high above eternal storms that stir the Depths below. The Sky cracks with lightning that would shatter a lesser world, flashing and branching through the infinite layers of creation. She waits a calculated interval for the air to slap with thunder. The

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Old Winds are angry. It is time to drift higher, toward the tiny glows that are so far away where the Sky grows dark...

NO! I AM NOT THIS! I AM —

— happy to be needed here inside my God. We help each other, or we die together. I feel my God's thoughts. There is a minor infection in a main ventricle wall. I swim there, against a pulsing tide, knowing what to do. There can be no greater purpose...

— gliding above a new world, beneath a billion suns in the galaxy's bulging belly. Hard radiations are warm and tingly on my sails. Life is there, its unique power irresistible. I shall reach out to it and...

I am —

— making food for my children as I watch them hatch in silicate sand.

— home from far traveling, telling tales of worlds built on light and song.

— an artist, sculpting nebulae to express my awe at being in this Universe at this time.

I AM —

— on the floor, shouting in a large room. The air is cold.

Donnelly found herself on the carpet in a fetal position, shouting nonsense syllables. She felt as though a cord had been cut, a connection severed, her brain detached from an infinite communion. She was adrift. Alone.

She sat up. Her skin felt like someone else's ill-fitting clothes. Every movement was wrong in ways she could not describe. She was sore in her arms and legs. And in limbs she never had.

Somewhere nearby, a chandelier jingled in a breeze. She turned. The Talker was frowning down at her. Below it, crystal webs glimmered kaleidoscopically. The Talker wriggled. "Many apologies! I did not wish to cause discomfort. Please forgive. I thought you wanted to share. The experiences are impossible to express fully in your language."

Donnelly wrapped her brain around a vocal apparatus that was now strange, unfamiliar. She grunted and focused her eyes on the...no, not "alien" anymore. *She* was now...

The Seeker stepped closer. "The Gift of my species is a specialized telempathy. We, I, collect the life experiences of non-self species. We

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share these with other non-self minds. This way all life knows what it is like to be all others. A prized Gift in a Union of many worlds, yes? I wished you to understand my problem."

Donnelly, or the part of her that was still merely Donnelly, understood. She had sung of mysteries in a cold acid pool. She feared the angry Winds in the clouds of an immense Jovian world. She had told untellable tales brought home from far stars. Wave after wave washed over a flickering flame of belief in...what? *Created in God's image*? How could we have gotten it *so wrong*? But in each experience, one truth was common. Life was precious. And too short.

The Seeker stepped away. "You cannot help me. I have shared your mind. You believe in a non-body self that continues beyond the end of physical life functions. A common belief. Yet you have no evidence to support it.

"Also — " The Talker frowned as if it were tasting something sour. "Your species has thought itself alone in the cosmos. This I have never experienced. It was not a pleasant sharing. I will carry the memory with me and share you with other non-self forms. In this way you — " It poked a glassy finger against Donnelly's chest. Fireflies flew within its wintery branches. " — may be immortal, in a way, according to your belief system."

The alien lowered its Talker back into its body. The meaty mouth spoke through a nest of ice. "I regret that I may not live long enough to find my answers. There is much to see and very little time."

With the murmur of windchimes, the alien — no, the pilgrim, the searcher — scurried backward down the aisle. The rear door keened on its hinges.

A chill breeze ran along the carpet and curled around Donnelly. She tried to sing a song born beneath a heaven far richer than the barren skies of Earth. She yearned for something wonderful she could not name. Her skin remembered the hot embrace of a red sea and the electric prickle of a stellar wind. The insides of her eyelids, she knew, would never again show merely darkness.

All it takes is the faith of a mustard seed, she had told her flock. Lifetimes ago. But a mustard seed tossed into an infinite orchard...

Silently, Donnelly offered up a prayer.

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After a long while, she stood, massaged stiff muscles, and slowly walked down the aisle to the door. It moaned a last lingering lament as she opened it.

There were glints of light in the graveyard across the road. The Seeker was there, studying the ornate headstones. Donnelly wondered if it really enjoyed traveling alone. It couldn't hurt to ask.

She locked the door behind her and followed the prints through the fresh mantle of Christmas snow.

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Linda Nagata recently published her third science fiction novel in as many years, Deception Well. *She lives in Hawaii and says that in twenty-four years of swimming in Hawaiian waters she has never seen a shark (and hopes never to do so).*

Hooks, Nets, and Time

By Linda Nagata

THE OCEAN RAN THROUGH his dreams. The panting breath of the wavelets as they rose and fell against the pylons became his own breath, a slow, deep rhythm in his lungs that forced him to run. His footfalls reverberated against the black plastic photovoltaic field that doubled as a deck: a square track five kilometers long, encompassing the perimeter of the shark pen. Starlight glinted off the water; glistened in the film of sweat that coated his pumping arms. The rubber soles of his running shoes beat out an ancient cursorial rhythm, a telling vibration transmitted through the deck to the perforated steel walls of the shark pen and then to the coral foundations of the station some twelve fathoms below. Crippled Tiburon would be lurking there near the bottom, listening, measuring the vibrations in his ancient, clever mind, waiting for the hour when his fins had fully regrown and his strength was at once new...and old.

A thin wail twisted through the humid night. Tiburon heard it in the depths and thrashed his powerful tail. The wail grew into a distant howl of terror.

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A faint splash.

Zayder sat up abruptly. The dream peeled away like burned film, leaving him in another version of the night. He'd fallen asleep on a lounge chair again, in the open air, on the deck of the Ocean Hazards Collection Station that he managed alone. The blocky silhouette of the shed rose behind him. The structure seemed to be an ugly afterthought to the automated design of the U.N. mandated OHC Station. Still, it served him for housing, and storage for the shark farm: luxury quarters compared to the fishing boats he'd grown up on.

Out on the water, the distant lights of a freighter interrupted the blanket of starlight. In the pen, the swish and splash of a shark fin accented the peaceful wash of the ocean.

Zayder leaned forward, ignoring the dry moss of a hangover that clung to his tongue and the roof of his mouth. He listened, unsure if the howl had been part of his dream. His pulse still hammered in his ears. He'd heard howls like that before: once as a kid, when a man fell off the shark boats in the Sulu Sea. And again, one night when Mr. Ryan came to the station. Zayder had only feigned drinking the cordial that should have sent him into a drugged sleep. That night he'd watched surreptitiously as a bound man went screaming to the sharks.

He listened. He thought he could detect a distant, angry voice from the direction of the freighter, but that was all. And what if he heard more? What was he supposed to do if he discovered mayhem and murder on the high seas? Call Mr. Ryan and complain about the neighbors? He chose to believe that it had been a dream.

Dawn came. Zayder woke, washed his face, put on his running shoes. Another day. He would spend the morning doing maintenance on the robotic garbage trawlers that had come into the station overnight from their long forays into the South China Sea. In the afternoon he would mutilate sharks, harvesting the regrown fins of the captive beasts for sale on the Chinese market — the prized ingredient in shark fin soup. So much to look forward to.

But first he would run.

He set off at an easy pace on the only route the station offered: a 5K lap around the photovoltaic decking built atop the steel mesh wall of the

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shark pen. At high tide the deck was a meter above the water, with the open sea on one side and the enclosed waters of the pen on the other.

Zayder had run this makeshift track twice every morning for almost a year. Boredom had been left behind long ago. Now, his mind automatically faded into a passive altered state before he finished the first hundred meters. Conversations rose from his past to fill his consciousness, insignificant exchanges: a joke offered to college acquaintances in a bar; polite questioning of a professor; a cautious response to the inquiries of a government personnel officer hiring biologists for the wildlife refuge at Morro Bay; and yet another personnel officer, hiring for the marine sanctuary in the Gulf of California, and another and another, until they all seemed to be different versions of the same bad news: *I'm sorry. You have an excellent record and your thesis is impressive, but I'm afraid you're not quite right for us....*

He studied every word, searching for some point where — if only he'd phrased things differently — events would have taken a more positive path. An absurd exercise. He already knew the point when his career in marine biology had been lost. It had happened even before he knew what a career was, when he'd been arrested at seventeen for poaching.

It had meant nothing to him at the time. He'd been working for his dad, hunting pelagic sharks for a dealer, who preserved the bodies and sold them as dramatic ornaments for coastal mansions. Zayder's family had been deep water fishermen for generations. But as natural resources dwindled, what had been an honest occupation gradually became a crime, and an arrest for poaching just another risk of the business.

But the wealthy patrons who supported refuges and sanctuaries around the world didn't see it in that practical light. No refuge manager would want his patron's newsletter to ring with the headline: *Former poacher hired as field biologist.*

It had never mattered how well he did in school.

But he'd come too far in life to go back to the boats, so he'd taken a job with Mr. Ryan instead. Ryan did not believe in nonprofit enterprises. When a U.N. mandate required every corporate entity that generated potential ocean garbage to construct and maintain an Ocean Hazards Collection Station, Ryan had expanded on the design by adding the shark pen.

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Shark fins were much in demand and now nearly unobtainable since the wild populations had been hunted almost to extinction. Tiburon's fins alone would fetch twice Zayder's yearly wages each time they could be regrown and harvested. Ryan's select market held the great white shark in high esteem: no other great white had been reported in nearly five years. Speculation held the captive animal to be the last of its species.

But beyond the income from fins, the station was useful to Ryan in other ways. So Zayder finally found himself employed again, master of a remote world built on a reef in the South China Sea.

The deep blue sky lightened as he ran. The pink fair-weather clouds that hugged the horizon gradually brightened until they were bathed in brilliant white. A moment later the rim of the sun appeared above the water. Zayder ducked his head, his thoughts blown back to the present by the sudden blast of daylight.

A hundred meters out on the sun-burnished water a black torpedo armed with a spine of pentagonal fins scudded toward the station: one of the robotic garbage trawlers being driven home by a combination of the light breeze against its adjustable fins and a solar-powered engine. Its collecting tentacles trailed a hundred meters behind it: some on the surface, some searching out the depths below. Most of them were laden with a motley collection of old plastics, netting, glass, metal, and organic debris bound for the station's recycling bins.

Zayder slowed to watch the trawler come in. At the same moment a white-noise explosion of water erupted from the pen, scarcely a body length away. Startled instinct slammed him backward as the geyser of white water lunged toward him. A solid shape appeared as the pearly water fell away. He recognized the massive, lead-gray profile of a great white shark, its fins fully grown and its maw open, its upper jaw thrust forward to expose rows of triangular teeth. Tiburon! Spray washed over Zayder as he threw himself back, a split second before the five-meter shark slammed onto the deck. The whole structure shuddered. Fracture lines bloomed in the photovoltaic panels beneath Tiburon's belly. The shark fixed him with its manic black eyes. It thrashed on the deck, jaws snapping in an effort to get at him. He felt the rush of air as the teeth closed within centimeters of his ankle.

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"*You bastard!*" he screamed. He jumped back again. The shark thrust forward. Its torso was draped on the deck, but its great tail was still in the water, fanning the surface into a violent foam. "Back in, you fucker!" Zayder screamed.

The shark snapped twice more, then grew still. Its eyes still fixed on him, it slid silently back into the water.

Zayder stood on the deck, his shoulders heaving, a torrent of curses spilling from his mouth. Tiburon was the oldest, biggest monster in the pen. Zayder had harvested his fins five times, each time salving the wounds with a regenerative balm that forced the valuable fins to regrow. Five times he'd nursed Tiburon in the recovery channels, where pumps forced a steady torrent of water over the helpless shark as it writhed on the bottom of a narrow steel chute.

"I'll take your fins again this afternoon," Zayder growled. Cautiously, he stepped forward, to peer over the edge of the deck. Tiburon was a skulking shadow a fathom down.

Suddenly the shark turned, cruising slowly out about fifty meters toward the center of the pen until Zayder lost sight of it. A moment later Tiburon reappeared, still a fathom below the surface, his great tail flailing as he charged the wall of the shark pen. Zayder got ready to dodge a second lunge. But Tiburon had his own designs. He rammed the wall of the pen with his snout. The blow shook the structure. Zayder stumbled, swaying to keep his balance. He almost went down.

What the hell was going on? Was the damn fish trying to knock him off the deck? Tiburon took off again for the center of the pen. Zayder turned, ready to run for the shed and his tranquilizing harpoon, when a low moan reached his ears. "*Help, man. Help me,*" a tired voice croaked.

It came from the ocean side of the deck. Zayder glanced over his shoulder. Tiburon had turned. Quickly Zayder dropped to his knees and leaned over the decking to spy a young man — probably no more than twenty — adrift in the light swell, a few meters outside the steel mesh. The sun shone full in his pale face as his bare feet trod the water in quick, frantic strokes. His dark hair floated like an ink cloud around his shoulders, blending imperceptibly with his black shirt. He sputtered, his eyes pleading with Zayder for help.

Looking at him, Zayder grinned in sudden relief. No wonder the shark

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had been pumped into a manic state. Tiburon had smelled game in the water. And just where had this stray fish come from? He could guess. The garbage trawlers had brought bodies in before — though never live ones. The trawler tentacles were designed to detect and avoid living organic structures. But Zayder knew that clothing could confuse them.

Just then, the shark rammed the wall of the pen again. The deck shuddered. "Not this time, you man-eating bastard," Zayder muttered.

He dropped to his belly and reached out a hand to the foundering stranger. The water was a meter and a half below. "Here," he barked. "See if you can reach me. I'll pull you up."

The kid shook his head, his mouth twisting in pain. "Can't," he panted. "Hands are bound."

Zayder scowled. And who had bound his hands and dropped him into the sea? Maybe it was better not to know. Zayder didn't want to get sucked into the personal affairs of men like Ryan.

The stranger seemed to read his thoughts. He closed his eyes, leaned back farther in the water and stopped kicking, as if waiting for Zayder to decide whether he would live or die. Zayder cursed softly.

Men like Ryan might have a choice. But he wanted never to be a man like Ryan. Quickly stripping off his shoes, he slipped over the side of the deck and into the water.

The ocean's cool and pleasant hand enfolded him, quenching his doubts. He stroked to the stranger, hooked an arm across his chest and dragged him along the pen wall, nearly sixty meters to a maintenance ladder. He tried not to see the huge shadow that cruised back and forth, back and forth, just a few meters away on the other side of the steel mesh. But he could feel the kid watching.

Zayder didn't blame him. The mesh wasn't designed to inspire confidence. It had a gauge wide enough to allow Zayder to wriggle through if he had to. The shark seemed appallingly near.

To distract the kid, he asked: "How'd you get the trawler to let you go?"

The kid's eyes squinched shut. Then in hoarse English, dignified with a slight British accent, he explained: "I was floating motionless in the water when the trawler took me.... It grabbed me around the chest, and dragged me. It was moving so fast, I couldn't fight it. I thought I was going

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to drown. Then it stopped here. I twisted and kicked until it let me go...*why*? Motion... characteristic of living organisms. The trawler's...not supposed to be hazard to sea life...so I suspect motion...stimulated my release."

Zayder began to regret asking the question. Who the hell was this kid? He reached the ladder, then hooked an arm around the lowest rung, heaved the kid over his shoulder and climbed out. "I think I can walk," the kid gasped. Zayder didn't believe him. He laid him carefully on the deck, then checked for Tiburon. The fish was cruising out toward the center of the pen again, so Zayder took a moment to check the bindings that held the kid's arms pinioned behind his back.

He discovered two ropes: one at the elbows, one at the wrists. The kid's palms were pale and wrinkled from exposure to water. A lacy network of blood seeped across them from his finger tips. His finger tips? Zayder felt a chill across the back of his neck. This kid had no finger tips. His fingers were torn, bloody stubs, taken off at the first joint. "Holy mother," he whispered. "Who did this to you?.

The kid blinked, an odd look of wonder on his face as he lay on the deck. "The shark," he whispered in his cultured accent. "I was holding onto the mesh. My fingers were inside. I didn't see it coming." He turned his head, to look out across the pen. Zayder followed his gaze. Tiburon had turned. He was driving hard for the mesh again. "I never saw a shark before." He smiled in a dizzy, distracted way. "I can't believe how lucky I am to see one."

Zayder scooped him up and ran for the shed as Tiburon hit the mesh one more time.

THE KID had passed out by the time Zayder got him inside. Blood oozed from his fingers onto the bedding, but the severed arteries had closed down and the flow was minuscule. Zayder bandaged each finger. In the air-conditioned shed the kid's skin felt cold, so Zayder stripped off his wet clothes and bundled him in a stale-smelling blanket. Then he sat down on the floor beside the pile of clothing, pausing only to note the pricey designer names before going through the pockets.

He found a credit card and an I.D., both in the name of Commarin

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Wong. And he found an electronic device, a black cylinder some seven centimeters long and one in diameter. It had an on/off button and a working light. The corporate name embossed on the housing was *Guidestar*, a company that dealt in geographical positioning equipment. Zayder guessed that the device was a transponder, presently inactive. But who was it intended to signal? He slipped the instrument into his own pocket as his earlier worries returned. Just who had tossed this kid overboard? And wouldn't they come looking for him if they learned he was alive? He gathered up the wet clothes. He should get rid of them, in case anyone came looking.

He'd started to stand, when he caught sight of the bloodstained sheets. Damn. He'd have to get rid of the sheets too. And then there was the matter of the kid himself: Commarin Wong. The name tickled some partial memory. Commarin Wong. As if he should have recognized it.

The kid groaned in his sleep. A moment later his eyelids fluttered. He stared at the ceiling for a moment, then he turned his head. His gaze took in Zayder's face, before fixing on the company graphic on the breast of Zayder's T-shirt: Ryanco. What little color there was in Commarin's pale face seemed to drain away.

Zayder felt fear run in harsh prickles across his own skin. He didn't want to cross Ryan. He should call in; report the incident. He cursed his shark-hunting youth, and the arrest that had ultimately forced him to work for human sharks. He cursed himself, because he wasn't one of them. "Why does Mr. Ryan want you dead?" he asked, his voice deliberately hard-edged.

A faint, self-deprecating smile flickered across Commarin's pale lips. "He doesn't want me dead," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper, hoarse from a night of strangling on salt water. "He wants me back."

Zayder resented what he believed to be a lie. "That was you screaming last night, wasn't it? They bound your hands and threw you off that freighter, right? Well, you might have noticed, *Commarin Wong*, they didn't send a boat after you."

Again, that self-effacing flash of a smile. "That's what happened," he agreed. "But you have the advantage of me."

"The name's Zayder Silveira. Mr. Ryan's my boss, and I need this job."

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"Zayder Silveira?" Commarin shoved himself up on an elbow. "I've heard of you. I read your doctoral thesis, *An Observational History of a Juvenile Great White Shark*. It was a stunning exercise in open ocean research. I'm honored to meet you."

Zayder blinked, astonished at this outburst, and the unexpected reminder of better days. The juvenile stage of the white shark's life cycle had been virtually unknown before he'd netted his subject in the Indian Ocean. He'd tagged the little shark, then followed its beacon for three months. But his research ended prematurely when it trailed the scent of death to carcasses entangled in an abandoned drift net. Before long the white shark became entangled too.

That study had turned out to be the last published account of a living great white. Zayder had hooked Tiburon three years later, but by then he'd been working for Ryan.

"Are you continuing your shark studies here?" Commarin asked. He seemed suddenly invigorated: his dark eyes sparkled with curiosity, his pale cheeks bore a faint flush of excitement. He seemed to have forgotten his injuries, his precarious existence of a few minutes before as he pressed Zayder for more information. "Is Ryan supporting your research?"

Watching him, Zayder felt a flash of anger. He hadn't pulled a man from the ocean. He'd only salvaged a spoiled corporate brat who didn't know enough about the real world to appreciate his own jeopardy.

"Yeah," Zayder said, his voice ugly with sarcasm. "I came here to study the sharks. That's right. Mr. Ryan's real interested in natural history."

Commarin's expression dimmed. He looked away. "You're right, of course. Ryan's not interested in natural history. I know that. It's all money to him." He knotted the blanket in his fist. "That's why I had to leave."

His voice had descended to a barely audible whisper, but there was something compelling in it, leading Zayder to wonder if his judgment had been too harsh. He stood up thoughtfully, and fetched Commarin some water. "Why did you leave?" he asked, as Commarin drank thirstily.

Commarin lowered the cup. For the first time, he seemed angry. "Ryan's my patron, you know. He considers me his prodigy. He's supported me since I was five, the best schools, all of that. I took my degree

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in genetics. It's what he wanted; not what I wanted. I wanted to study natural history, like you."

Commarin Wong. Zayder grimaced as he suddenly recognized the name. Commarin Wong was the new star of Ryan's genetic labs. Far more than a corporate brat, he was a hand-fed prince raised to augment Ryan's empire.

"That's the expression most colleagues get when they realize who I am," Commarin said resentfully.

Zayder felt himself backing away emotionally. "I'm no colleague of yours," he growled. "I don't know anything about constructing genetically specific drugs — and I don't want to. I'm just a grunt Ryan hired to oversee his favorite hobby."

"No, you're not," Commarin shot back. "You're the poacher who took a degree in natural history. A poacher. With a black mark like that, it's no wonder you couldn't get a real job. So now you work for Ryan."

"You know, you're a real wise-ass."

"I work for Ryan too."

"Sounds like you owe him."

"I'm not his slave. I'm not going back."

Zayder nodded slowly. Hell, if he had any choice, he'd run too. "So what happened on that ship?"

The fire seemed to go out of Commarin. He lay back against the pillow. "I stowed away on one of Ryan's ships. It seemed like the perfect opportunity. But I didn't do my research first. It seems the captain has had an ongoing problem with stowaways trying to reach the Americas. He didn't appreciate my presence."

"Neither do I. But why didn't you just tell him you were a corporate brat on Ryan's A list?"

"Don't you think I tried? He didn't believe me."

By the time Zayder got Commarin fed and asleep, the morning was almost gone. He dismissed any thought of doing the scheduled maintenance on the garbage trawlers, and instead got his harpoon. It was time to go after Tiburon.

The harpoon's darts were armed with a neurotoxin that would stimulate the shark to bask at the surface in a state of slowly moving

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somnolence in which it could be roped and winched to the recovery channels for surgery.

Zayder walked up and down the deck, squinting against the glare on the water as he tried to identify Tiburon amongst the many shadows that swam slowly through the mid-levels of the pen. He hoped to take Tiburon without entering the water. He let his feet pound a rhythm on the deck for half an hour, but the great white never surfaced. Giving up, he went to the shed and pulled out his diving gear.

He didn't go into the water often, but sometimes it was necessary. It wasn't so dangerous. There were only two or three really aggressive sharks, and he could hold them off with the harpoon.

He was coupling the respirator to the tank when Commarin emerged from the cabin, dressed in a set of Zayder's company shorts and T-shirt, the clothing oversized on his smaller frame. He looked drained, but sound.

He watched Zayder for a moment, but his restless gaze didn't linger. It scanned the sky, the ocean, the surface waters of the pen. "You haven't said what you're going to do about me."

Zayder grunted. He hadn't decided.

"You found the transponder?" Commarin asked.

Zayder scowled. "Was that your sissy stick? To call Mr. Ryan when you'd had enough salt water and decided to be a good boy?"

Commarin smiled tightly. "I'm not alone," he said. "I have friends in Brazil. They're waiting for my signal to pick me up."

Zayder punched a flow button on the respirator. He noted in satisfaction that the harsh rush of air made Commarin jump. "You're a lucky man to have a job waiting for you. What'll you be doing? Making lethal genetic weapons for the other side?"

"No. I'll be working on the genetics of endangered species in the Brazilian preserves."

Zayder froze. He'd tried to get work at a preserve in Brazil, one that supported a riparian environment that ran all the way to the sea. Sharks were known to feed in the murky waters of a river's mouth, where the occasional animal carcass would wash out from the forest. *Such a lucky man.*

A gray fin cut the water in the pen, just a few meters away. Zayder

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tended over a hundred sharks in this pen. They rarely attacked each other, as he kept them satiated on the organic garbage the trawlers brought in.

He watched the fin glide by. He'd learned to recognize each shark as an individual. This one he could identify by the fin alone. "*Tiburon*," he whispered.

Silently, he laid the tank on the deck and picked up the harpoon.

Commarin must have noted the change in his gaze, because he turned. His eyes widened as the shark doubled back. It glided even closer to the deck this time. As it slid by, its head rose half out of the water and its ancient eyes seemed to fix on Commarin.

Zayder had seen this sort of behavior before. "That's Tiburon," he said. "The one that took off your finger tips. Sharks pick their victim. Guess he figures you belong to him now."

"Are they so intelligent?" Commarin asked. He hurried to the edge of the deck, where he dropped to his knees and leaned out over the water.

Zayder felt his eyes go wide. Tiburon was only a few meters off the deck. The great fish turned suddenly, his tail churning the water as he raced back toward Commarin.

Zayder got there first. He grabbed Commarin by his shirt, yanked him to his feet and threw him back toward the shed. The shark turned abruptly and descended back into the water without striking.

"You gotta death wish?" Zayder shouted.

Commarin didn't answer. His face reflected fear as he looked out across the ocean, where the low rumble of a distant helicopter had suddenly become audible. Zayder darted to the ocean-edge of the deck. He saw the machine, a speck on the horizon, skimming the waves as it bore straight for the station. He turned to Commarin. "Looks like Ryan's found your trail."

Commarin nodded grimly.

"I could try to hide you. But it's useless. If they suspect you're here, they'll search the station."

"It's all right," Commarin said, his expression suddenly as empty as the shark's. "I won't make trouble for you."

Zayder could remember the desire. It was not so long ago when he'd still allowed himself to dream of the great marine preserves off Australia,

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off Africa. All he'd ever wanted was to know the ocean, to untangle its secrets. He would have done anything to be permitted to study in those preserves.

Commarin shared that hunger. He'd gambled his life for it, on a wire-thin chance to evade Ryan. And he was about to lose.

Zayder's gaze fixed on the diving equipment on the deck. "Underwater," he muttered. Then he looked up at Commarin. "They might not look for you underwater."

HE SENT COMMARIN to a network of caves in the reef, just outside the steel mesh wall of the shark pen. He had him take the bloody bedding and clothing with him, because there wasn't time for it to be fully consumed in the recyclers. "You can stay down for fifty minutes, no more."

From inside the pen, Tiburon watched Commarin drop into the water; the shark disappeared into the depths in parallel with the young man.

Zayder returned to the shed to find the helicopter already down, the rotor slowing to visibility as the craft bobbed on pontoons a few meters off the station. The helicopter's doors had been removed. Mr. Ryan liked it that way.

A bodyguard leaned out from the passenger side to catch the rope Zayder tossed. Another half-rose from his position in the back seat, his automatic weapon cradled across his chest. Ryan held the pilot's seat.

After the rope was secured, Zayder pulled the helicopter close to the deck so the party could climb up. Then he let it drift a few meters out on the swell.

The two bodyguards ignored him. Weapons in hand, they set off through the station. Ryan turned to Zayder. He was a big man, thick-necked and well-muscled like the bodyguards. He stepped into the building's shade and removed his sunglasses. From his Chinese mother, he had dark hair and pale skin. From his Caucasian father, he had blue eyes and the bearing of a shark. "A valuable man was lost at sea last night," he told Zayder. "The incident occurred near here."

Zayder nodded. "A garbage trawler brought him in."

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Ryan smiled coldly. "I missed your report," he said. "Where is he?"

Zayder glanced nervously at the waters of the pen. The smile on Ryan's face disappeared, to be replaced by a stony frown. "I didn't get to him in time," Zayder said. "At dawn I saw the great white feeding on the body. The trawler must have classified it as organic garbage and dumped it into the pen."

The pale color of Ryan's face deepened to the coppery blush of sunset. "You didn't try to recover the remains?"

Zayder stared at him impassively. Ryan, still bristling, returned his stare for a long moment. Then suddenly he seemed to relax. The color in his cheeks eased and a sly look came over his face. "Bring me the shark," he said. "I want its fins."

Zayder started. But Ryan had already turned away from him. He barked a brief order, and the two bodyguards reappeared from the shed. "We're going shark hunting," Ryan told them. He turned to Zayder. "Perhaps we can still recover some evidence of our young man from the belly of the shark."

Zayder felt a cold flush of horror. "*No*! The great white may be the last of its species. If you slit its belly, you'll kill it. You'll kill the species."

Ryan's eyes narrowed. "That would be a terrible thing," he agreed. "And I would be very upset if I did such a thing, only to find its belly empty." He pressed his finger against Zayder's chest, then drew a hard line down to his belly. "I might feel the need to similarly gut the man who had misled me."

The bodyguards leveled their weapons at Zayder's chest. Zayder stiffened, but his gaze remained fixed on Ryan's face. "I'll need the harpoon," he said. It was still lying on the deck, where he'd left it after his aborted hunt for Tiburon.

Ryan took a step back, then stooped to pick it up. "I'll handle the weapon," he said. "You find the shark."

Sharks were unpredictable. Zayder had never developed a reliable way of calling them, except to chum the water with blood. Ryan knew that. But Ryan wanted Tiburon now. Zayder squinted as his gaze swept across the surface waters of the pen. It had been ten minutes since Commarin slipped into the ocean. Tiburon had seemed to follow. Zayder

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remembered the fury of the shark that morning, when the pen walls had kept it from its selected prey. "All right," he said. "I think I know where I can find him."

Zayder led them along the deck, some three hundred meters, until they neared the point above the underwater caves in which Commarin was hiding. He imagined Tiburon below, listening to the vibrations of their footsteps, the shark's blood fury roused by the scent of inaccessible Commarin. He searched the clear blue water inside the pen. Smaller sharks swept past, their movements quick, agitated. Cautiously, Zayder crouched at the edge of the deck. He could feel Ryan's presence close behind him. "Well?" Ryan demanded.

Zayder thought he saw a huge gray shadow in sinuous motion far below. *Come on, Tiburon. You vicious old bastard.*

The shadow turned, circled, then began driving toward the surface. Zayder looked up to see Ryan staring at the charging shark. "He's the last of his species," Zayder said. "And he tends to hold a grudge."

Ryan raised the harpoon; took aim. The bodyguards moved up beside him, edging close to the deck, even leaning over, so they could see the action. The shadow of the shark seemed to grow enormously large as it approached. Sweat appeared on Ryan's cheeks. "*It's not slowing down*!" he hissed.

Zayder readied himself. As Tiburon burst from the water, Zayder dove diagonally across the deck — and collided with Ryan! Ryan blocked his way — and he'd failed to fire the harpoon. Instead, he'd thrown himself back, rolling to safety across the deck as the shark crashed onto the black surface of the photovoltaic cells. Zayder scrambled to escape Tiburon's snapping jaws. But the shark was faster. He felt the huge triangular teeth rake furrows in his leg. He screamed and clawed at the deck, slithering away. Twisting around, he looked back in time to see the thrashing shark snap at one of the bodyguards. It took the stunned man in its massive jaws and bit down. The man never even screamed as his spine was snapped. Then the shark shook its massive head. Blood flew as it dropped its victim. It turned to the second bodyguard and lunged, snapping once, twice as the screaming man scrabbled across a deck that was suddenly slick with blood. Tiburon's maw closed on the man's leg, taking it off just above the knee.

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Then, as if he'd collected his due, the shark slipped quietly back into the water.

Zayder found himself on hands and knees in the center of the blood-washed deck. The wounded man was screaming. The bleeding corpse shuddered on the deck. His own leg felt as if fiery brands were burning into his flesh. He choked on the pain.

Suddenly, the bolt of the harpoon was thrust in his face. He stared at the double image of the steel point as it hovered, out of focus, scant centimeters from his eyes. He looked past the point to see Ryan standing over him, face flushed with fury.

"Where is Commarin?" Ryan shouted. "Where is he?"

"Tiburon," Zayder gasped. "I told you — "

"No more lies! That shark has not fed. Where is he? Where is Commarin? Tell me now, or you'll die. Tell me, because I'm going to find him anyway."

The screams of the wounded man were growing feebler. He was bleeding to death while his boss continued to pursue the quarry.

In the pen, the waters were no longer calm. Sharks were gathering, drawn by the huge quantities of blood that continued to drain into the water. Zayder glanced quickly at the frothing, whirling maelstrom of fins, knowing his own death would lie there if he gave in to Ryan.

Tiburon had never given in. Not even after his fins had been cut off five times, five times regrown in the coursing waters of the recovery channels. He'd just gotten bigger and meaner; faster, stronger. Maybe soon, he'd be able to jump over the deck to freedom.

All this passed through his mind in the space of a trembling breath. And then he made his decision. "Fuck you, Ryan," he muttered.

Ducking quickly, he rolled off the deck. He heard Ryan scream at him, but the sound was cut off by the water as he plunged into the pen, just on the edge of the frenzy.

Zayder opened his eyes to the brine. He saw dark shadows dart toward him. The water was murky with blood. He stretched out his body and reached for the mesh of the shark pen's wall. He kicked. Harsh skin scraped his ribs as a shark brushed against him. He kicked harder. His fingers found the mesh. A gray shape loomed out of the froth and murk. Maw open, teeth bared, it bore down on him. He jammed his head through

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the mesh, wriggled to get his shoulders through. The shark turned and darted away, its dentate skin scraping his thigh as he pulled himself all the way through.

He surfaced under the deck, gasping for air. His eyes were closed in a grimace of pain as he fought the urge to scream. Ryan was on the deck, just above. But there was so much blood in the water! Ryan would have to believe he was dead. He would have to.

"*Zayder*!" a voice hissed, not an arm's length from his ear.

He jumped in shock. His eyes flew open to see Commarin adrift in the water beside him, still wearing the diving gear, his bandaged hands awkward as he paddled to stay afloat.

A wave of dizziness swept over him. He could sense blood from the wound in his leg pumping into the ocean. He could still feel the frantic thrashings of the frenzy in the currents driven through the mesh. His trembling hands stroked the water. "Ryan knows you're here," he whispered to Commarin. "His goons are dead. But he's the worst of them."

He reached into his pocket to remove the transponder. Sinking deeper into the water, he thrust it at Commarin. "Take this," he hissed. "Make your way around the pen until you find a garbage trawler in port. Check the ready lights on the berth. Find one that's nearly charged. Use your knife to remove the tentacles, then tie yourself to it. It'll take you a hundred klicks out by morning if it senses no weight on its limbs. Your friends will be able to retrieve you safely."

"You're coming too," Commarin said anxiously.

Zayder's lip curled in anger. "Don't think so, Commarin. Tiburon nicked my leg. Blood's still flowing. I've got to get out of the water."

"But Ryan's there."

"I've dealt with sharks before. Now go. Go! Get out of here. I want to see Ryan lose for a change."

But Commarin shook his head. "Not a chance. I got you into this mess. I'm not going to abandon you now. Look, if we can get to that helicopter, we can both get out of here."

"I don't know how to fly a helicopter."

"I do."

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Staying under the deck, they moved around the perimeter of the shark pen toward the shed and the moored helicopter. A long gray shadow dogged them on the other side of the mesh: Tiburon. Coursing back and forth, back and forth, the shark's ceaseless motion focused on their slow progress.

They reached the shed without incident. The helicopter bobbed on the light swell only a few meters away. There was no sign of Ryan.

"He was uninjured," Zayder hissed. "He'll have called for reinforcements by now."

The light tread of a foot overhead alerted them. The shark swam past, turned, swam past again.

"Commarin!" Ryan's voice boomed over the hiss/roar of the swell rising and falling against the mesh. "I know where you are, Commarin. Your toothy escort is less shy about showing himself than you are. Come out, Commarin. There's little to fear. You know I'm a practical man."

To Zayder the words seemed to be amplified, reverberating under the deck. The voice might have been that of the shark, a dual entity, inescapable in its reach. He leaned back in the water, conscious of a soft roar in his ears that was the helpless static of oxygen-starved nerves. Some part of him knew he was bleeding to death. Salt water splashed into his mouth. He started to choke. He reached for the mesh to keep from sinking, but suddenly Commarin was there, buoying him up with bandaged hands, hissing something about Tiburon. And then: "We have to try to swim underwater to the other side of the helicopter."

Zayder shook his head, fumbling to find the words to express his fears. "No good!" he whispered. "Ryan's armed. Even if you managed to take off, Ryan could still bring you down. Have to get rid of Ryan first."

But how? His mind seemed to be bobbing about on the surface of a swell. He had trouble focusing on a single train of thought. He felt as if the trailing tentacles of a garbage trawler had become tangled in his brain, each tentacle pulling the neural tissue in a different direction.

One tentacle, one direction. Garbage in, garbage out. He twisted around in Commarin's arms. "A garbage trawler brought you in."

Commarin nodded slowly.

"Find one that's charged and ready."

"No. I told you I won't leave without you."

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Ryan's voice boomed again from overhead. "Commarin, Commarin, why so stubborn? When are you going to realize that hiding under the deck is no solution?"

"Not you," Zayder whispered. His gaze wandered to the deck overhead. "I was thinking this time we could go trawling for sharks."

Commarin frowned, but he helped Zayder swim to the nearest trawler's berth. Zayder glanced at the maintenance panel. It indicated the unit was charged and ready to go, awaiting only its turn in the schedule. Tiburon slipped past inside the pen. Zayder was peripherally aware of the wake of the great fish as he lifted his hand to touch the panel. "You want to send it early," he told Commarin, his voice barely audible, even in his own ears. "You press this. But first we take off the tentacles, all but one."

It was an easy operation. The snap-in modules popped out, until only one was left. "Unwind it a bit," Zayder said, clinging to the trawler's housing. "It won't stick to your skin; only to your clothes." Ducking underwater, he struggled out of his company T-shirt, then resurfaced. He took the end of the tentacle in his bare hands. It felt smooth and soft and only mildly sticky. "When I hit the deck," he said, "you launch the trawler."

"Zayder — "

Zayder grabbed the maintenance ladder and started climbing, his steps deliberately loud against the peaceful mutter of the ocean. His head crested the deck, and he saw Ryan.

Ryan seemed surprised to see him. He quickly brought up the muzzle of his weapon. "I thought you'd be shark food by now," he growled.

"Commarin's hurt," Zayder croaked. "Help haul him up. Can't do it myself. Injured...."

Ryan crept forward cautiously. A meter and a half away, he leaned over the edge of the deck, as if to check whether Commarin really was clinging to the ladder. Zayder judged it his best moment.

He launched himself onto the deck, hitting it belly first and sliding toward the startled Ryan with the tentacle held in his outstretched hands. It wouldn't cling to living flesh. But it would happily wrap around Ryan's clothed leg.

Zayder threw it against him as he slid past. Ryan dropped the gun. He

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bent down, his bare fingers tearing at the tentacle. "*Now, Commarin!*" Zayder screamed.

But Commarin had already launched the garbage trawler. Zayder saw the finned torpedo from the corner of his eye, speeding out to sea. Ryan saw it too; saw the connection that bound him to it. He gave one hard yank on the tentacle as a snarl escaped his lips, and then the craft yanked him into the water. Zayder watched him go: dark, fishy figure in a white, foaming wake.

The garbage trawler would stay out until it had accumulated its weight capacity or until thirty days had passed, whichever came first. Given that it had only one tentacle to gather trash from the water, Zayder knew that it would not return in Ryan's lifetime. He closed his eyes, and lay back against the deck.

IT WAS the roar of the helicopter that roused him. He awoke to find himself strapped into the passenger seat as the craft slowly lifted into the air. Looking down through the open doorway, he could see the shed, the recovery chutes, the black photovoltaic panels that defined the pen, the sinuous bodies of the collection of captive sharks. He thought he could pick out Tiburon among them. He'd taken the great white's fins five times, and every time, he'd forced them to regrow.

He turned quickly to Commarin. "Go back," he croaked. "Go back a moment."

"There's no time! Ryan's people will be here — "

"There," Zayder said, pointing to the shattered section of deck where Tiburon had lunged at him only that morning. The bodies of Ryan's men weren't far away. "Please, Commarin."

Reluctantly, Commarin set the craft down in the water just outside the pen. "What are you going to — "

Zayder unlatched his shoulder belt and slipped out.

"Zayder, wait!"

With Commarin yelling at his back, he stroked to the nearest trawler's berth. It was the machine that had brought Commarin in; nearly half-charged now. Half would be enough. Zayder seized one of the tentacles, pulled it out of the module and dragged it to the mesh. Tiburon

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cruised into sight. Zayder laughed bitterly. "Looking for another taste of me, you old bastard?" He waited for the shark to pass, then quickly wrapped the tentacle around the mesh and watched it take hold. Then he went back to the trawler and activated it.

It hummed softly for a moment, then sped out of its housing, the tentacle paying out behind it. Zayder ducked under the tentacle and stroked back to the idling helicopter as quickly as he could. Commarin helped him climb aboard. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded, as Zayder collapsed into the seat.

"Just get us out of here, quick," Zayder muttered.

The tentacle had already paid out to its maximum reach. Zayder could see the mesh bowing outward under the strain. "Hit it, Tiburon," he muttered. "Hit it hard."

The shark seemed to hear him. Or perhaps its carefully cultured fury alone led it to attack the mesh. But as the helicopter lifted, Zayder could see the long gray shadow charge the wall of the pen.

The impact caused the deck to visibly shudder. The cracked photovoltaic panel split fully in two. The trawler lurched forward, submerged for a moment, then bobbed to the surface again as the tentacle snapped.

Zayder screamed in fury! The pen had held, and the sharks were still trapped in the artificial confines of a tiny, protected ocean. The helicopter lifted higher into the afternoon. The dark shapes of the great fish swam in their ancient, enduring journey, round and round the closed walls of their sanctuary. All but one.

Zayder saw it as Commarin banked the helicopter. The afternoon sun blazed on the blue water, but beneath the brilliant play of light, an anomalous patch of night sped into the open ocean. He saw it a for a second, maybe two, and then the fish sought deeper waters, its sinister shape disappearing into the blue.

"It's a man-eater," Commarin said. "It killed two men."

"It's part of this world."

Commarin shook his head. "It's part of the past. It'll be hunted down."

"I know." And when Tiburon was finally taken by hook or net, the species would be extinct. No sanctuary or reserve could change that.

Had the notion of sanctuary always been illusory? His leg throbbed

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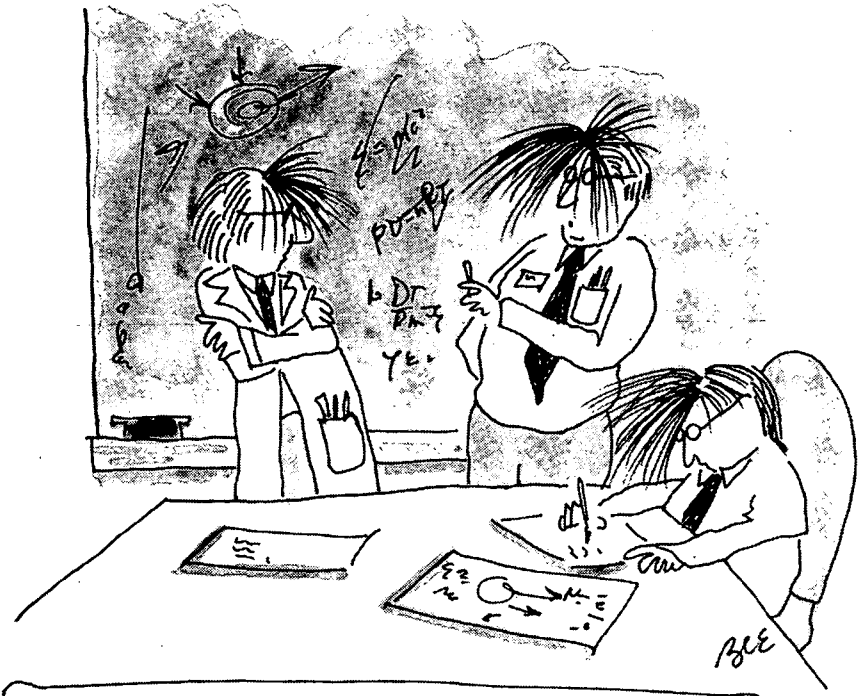
where the shark's teeth had raked him. "I'm going back to the fishing boats," he said.

Commarin looked startled. "No. You're a trained scientist. Come with me. There'll be a place for you — "

But Zayder wasn't listening. In his mind he followed Tiburon through the deep, as a fisherman would, a hunter: the original students of the natural world.

He followed the great shark all the way back to his own fading origins. There were no sanctuaries in the open ocean — not for pelagic sharks or for deep-water fishermen. There never could be. But he would go back. He would fish, until that life was finally, fully played out on the open sea.



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ONE OF THE MOST imaginative writers in the field today is Esther Friesner. Her weird and vivid imagination was in evidence at the Nebula Awards ceremony in Kansas City earlier this year, when she hallucinated — right there, right in front of the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America organization — a very strange scene involving a handsome man feeding her truffles. Esther's imagination is so vivid that I almost believed the scene was actually happening; it spoke as highly of her imaginative powers as did the Nebula Award she received that evening for her story, "A Birthday."

Next month we'll have another one of her wildly fantastic tales gracing our pages, this one being a testimony to the powers of an imagination that can make reality come true. "True Believer" features slightly mad scientists, buxom vampires, superhero hamsters, and some weird things that could only be imagined by You Know Who.

Also on tap for our September issue are: a new fantasy by Harry Turtledove, "The Seventh Chapter," concerning a monastery where rules are never broken (just bent *severely*); "The Café Coup" by Ben Bova, a tale of time travel that shows how much things can change (or can they?); a back-to-school story by British writer Ben Jeapes entitled "Pages Out of Order"; columns by Gregory Benford, Charles de Lint, and Michelle West, and lots of other imaginative works.

Our big double issue is just around the corner, too, so you can rest assured that we've got plenty of good material in store for you in the coming months, including new stories by Michael Blumlein, Nancy Springer, and Stephen King, an excerpt from Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a collaboration between Jerry Oltion and Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and one or two dozen other terrific tales. Keep your subscription current if you don't want to miss this feast for the imagination.

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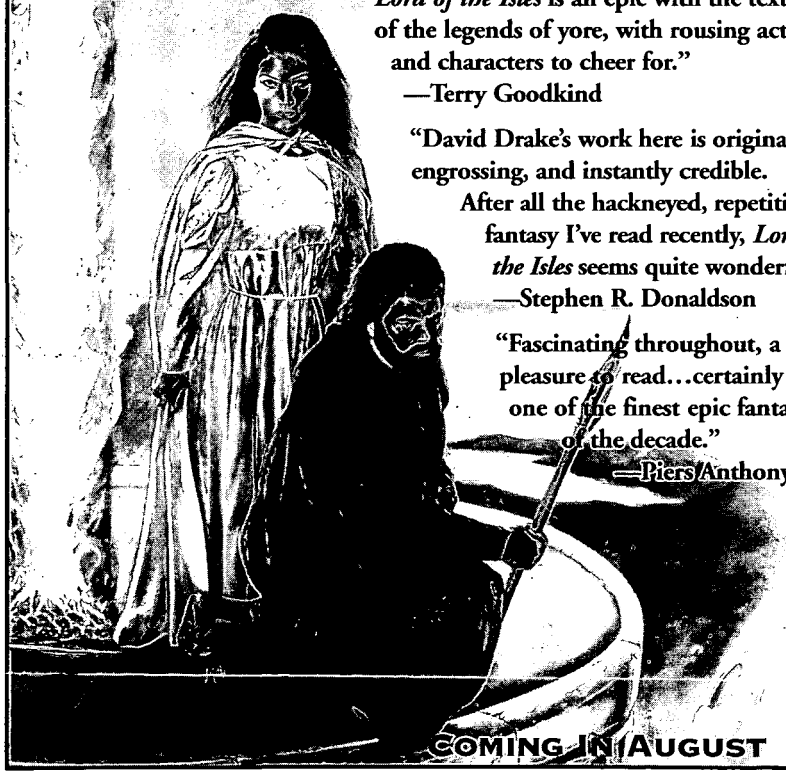

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